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## **Awareness about own shortcomings is crucial in building a career**

**“Women often neglect to build a personal brand which puts them at a disadvantage compared to male colleagues,” says Agnieszka Sawa, Q Securities CEO**

**The investment fund industry is often associated with a ruthless, men-dominated world. You, on the contrary, are an empathetic woman CEO of an investment firm and a brokerage house with offices in Luxembourg and Poland. How hard is it?**

**Agnieszka Sawa:** Ruthlessness in today's world will only scare away valuable employees. The times of running a heartless business that focuses only on profits and ignores people's well-being are over and, hopefully, forever.

Employees look for socially responsible companies with a clearly defined values system, as people are no longer willing to give up their moral standards in exchange for a paycheck.

In terms of gender, historically, the few women in managerial positions in financial institutions were most likely in operational areas. Today, women are slowly but steadily stepping up into key executive positions, which is not a standard yet, but the trend is progressing.

To increase the share of women in the financial industry, financial education should start already in high school. Gaining knowledge of the financial market and entities operating in it before graduating from high school would allow young people to make more informed decisions when choosing the field of university studies. Likely more women would be attracted to launch a career in finance after seeing early in their education how interesting and multi-faceted the industry is.

## **Are legal changes going in the right direction to support women's professional inclusion?**

Indeed, regulatory changes in women's favour have been substantial. For example, the duration of maternity leave was extended in recent years, and paternity leave was established.

The pandemic also worked in women's favour. Employers have become accustomed to seeing young children sitting on employees' laps or drawing with crayons next to a parent having an online meeting.

I'm also expecting a positive impact of the planned EU law promoting a more balanced gender representation on the boards of listed companies. The agreement reached in June foresees that [listed companies should aim to have at least 40% of their non-executive director positions held by members of the under-represented sex by 2026.](#)

However, over-regulation may have the opposite effect regardless of the topic, and the same holds for women's rights and pro-family policies. For example, further extensions of maternity leave to very long periods or an employer's unconditional obligation to agree to remote work for women bringing up children until they reach a certain age could become a barrier for

young women entering the labour market. Such legislation – already advanced in some jurisdictions – could disservice women.

**What would your advice be for women at the beginning of their careers in the financial industry? Where do you see that they make the most mistakes? What could they have planned differently?**

I would advise them to pay attention to building relationships in addition to being good at the actual work. Personally, I have entirely ignored building networks or a personal brand, which only confirms my observation that, statistically, men are much more focused on this element of career-building.

Work quality combined with empathy, commitment, teamwork and building relationships positively impact career development.

**What's your advice for efficient networking and relations building?**

It's about building positive relationships with colleagues, clients, superiors, and industry experts through personal contacts and participation in training, symposia, and social media, bringing together experts from a given industry.

Participation in projects gives such opportunities – on the one hand, we make ourselves known from the expert side, and on the other, we develop our experience ourselves. Therefore, I have always considered participation in new projects as an investment in myself.

You then have a greater chance of promotion than people who others in an organisation barely know and therefore are not aware of their expertise.

**Do our outside-of-work habits impact how we act in a professional setting?**

Roles from the family home have a significant impact on young people entering the workforce. Depending on the stereotype of a young woman's upbringing, she then copies what she learned at home in the workplace.

If you were taught to be humble, submissive and obedient, it would be difficult for the person to be promoted: you're most likely lacking assertiveness and are too modest. But, if a woman grew up in a family with a partnership-based division of duties, it would be easier for her to set boundaries in the office and clearly formulate her expectations.

Women in the first group need to put more effort into developing assertiveness and the ability to communicate outwardly what bothers them or what they expect. Awareness about our shortcomings – regardless of gender – is crucial to assess one's strengths and weaknesses you need to work on. It's a critical factor influencing your professional career development.

**What does a female perspective bring to an investment firm?**

A culture based on diversity positively affects organisational culture and teamwork; this is an obvious statement. And it's not just about gender diversity. A diverse team also means diverse competencies, personalities, and communication patterns.

All this together gives you a competitive advantage. In our organisation, whether at the managerial or expert level, everyone contributes something individually to the team, and we complement each other. At the same time, we are all open to new challenges, changes and learning.

### **Can you share a real-life example?**

When faced with a new challenge, we create cross-departmental expert teams that work out solutions based on their previous experience. An example of such mixed teamwork approach was the project of establishing a branch in Luxembourg that pooled our internal experts, the management board, and several experts from our befriended MWW law firm. This multi-disciplinary approach allowed us to complete the project in a record time.

Our advantage is open communication and not avoiding difficult topics. Even if the discussions can sometimes be heated, it allows us to come to constructive solutions.

### **What can men and women learn from each other in business?**

From my observations, women positively impact communication and talent retention in a company, and men more assertively set rules and boundaries and think about expansion and automation. That's why companies with higher employee diversity boast higher revenues.

### **Have you had a mentor or sponsor in your career path? Is it essential for ambitious women to have such support?**

At the beginning of my professional career in a financial institution, I was fortunate to find a role model. My director was an educated woman who created a new business line in the bank, employed young people and gave them a chance to build processes from scratch. She showed trust while creating a positive work atmosphere and often talked to us.

I was encouraged to influence the process creation and take part in the search for solutions, not relying on the already existing procedures but creating them myself. I could later test my ideas when working with an IT system supplier who needed to implement them in the newly developed solution for the funds we worked with.

Commitment to acquiring such experiences at the beginning of the career builds professional self-confidence. Therefore, I recommend people get involved in project work at the beginning of their career because it pays off further down the professional path.

I personally try to pass the DNA of our organisation to other people: the basis is customer focus, quality of services, empowerment, teamwork and a work culture where everyone dares to express their opinion, knowing that it will not have negative consequences, while clearly defining the boundaries in which we operate within the organisational culture.

I believe that more and more women help other women develop their careers in the financial industry, which was not so evident before, and that makes me very happy.

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