

Spotlight on...

Hélène Dimitracopoulos

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CFO, ZumaEnergia



Trained as an engineer with an aptitude for finance and as a French national living in Mexico, Hélène Dimitracopoulos says she is far from being a standard case – this is even more so, given that she has managed to reach the position of CFO in a sector that is not known for its diversity. We spoke to her about why she loves her role and of the challenges women often face in reaching senior positions.

Why did you decide to go into finance?

"I didn't set out to go into finance initially. I come from a family of engineers – my father and sister are both engineers and so I trained at the Ecole Nationale des Mines in Paris in engineering and statistics. It was a very traditional school and, at that point, we were the first generation where more than 10% of our class was female.

"I focused more on project management than on technical and structural engineering. That led me to finance quite quickly in my career – it just came naturally to me. I really enjoyed being able to see across all dimensions of a project, from legal and economic to finance. I was interested in renewable energy, so I joined EDF Energies Nouvelles, initially in France and then moving to Mexico, where I moved through the career ladder to become CFO.

"The combination of engineering and finance is quite an unusual one, but it's really useful in our sector because there are so many elements to each project. Here at Zuma, I am responsible for project development and acquisition and I am always involved in the financial evaluation of projects as well as structuring. It's a really exciting and varied role."

What challenges do you think women can face in your industry?

"Renewables is certainly more progressive than oil & gas, but there are still not many females in senior positions here. The more

senior you are, it becomes very apparent that your peers are not diverse – that's true in other sectors, but the energy industry has been quite late in promoting women.

"I'm still astounded at times by behaviours. I have been in so many meetings where a woman makes a point only for the same point to be repeated by a male colleague and it's only at that point that people listen – it's as if they just didn't hear what the woman had to say. We really need to get over these kinds of cultural limitations that still exist.

"That said, there can be benefits in being a minority at times. As a foreign female in a senior position in Mexico, it can sometimes be an advantage – people see you as being exotic and unusual."

What can organisations do to improve the situation?

"Organisations can do a lot. I have been very proactive in getting engagement from the CEOs I have worked with to promote the gender diversity agenda. If you don't get buy-in from the CEO, diversity will never get addressed. It has to come from the top.

"My CEO here at Zuma has been really important in ensuring diversity is, and remains, an important topic – it would have been impossible for me to do my job otherwise. We are very careful at hiring stage to ensure that 50% of the people we recruit are female – we are very conscious about this. Yet it's also about retaining female talent. To do that, organisations need to take account of individual circumstances, particularly during life's transition moments. We offered a single mother maternity coaching, for example. That helped acknowledge that she was a mother and wanted to be ambitious in her career and that the two are not contradictory. I have also ensured that female equality is important and addressed in my team, offering initiatives such as coaching to help women returning from maternity leave – which can be a very difficult moment in their lives – to integrate back into work.

"I think many problems come from not acknowledging diversity – we're not all the same and we don't all have the same pressures in our lives both inside and outside of work. You need an honest and open dialogue in the workplace to promote understanding because there will be some people that are just not aware of certain issues."

What's the biggest lesson you've learned?

"When I joined Zuma, my daughter was one. I was clear at the time that I couldn't work 20 hours a day and our CEO agreed that I should be able to leave the office at six o'clock every day. The problem was that I never left the office then. Working hours in Mexico are long – it's usual to work until eight o'clock in the evening and so there would be issues of meetings not ending on time or being scheduled for after I was meant to have left, for example.

"This experience taught me that I needed to be really consistent with the decisions that I made and that I had to work at balancing the needs of raising a family and doing a good job. If a meeting was scheduled to finish after six, I had to learn to say no, and that can be difficult when you love your job and you want to contribute as much as you can.

"This experience has meant that I am now very consciously supportive of my team. One of my female team members, for example, has a family and so I ensure the conditions are right for her to leave on time.

"But I also think that it's not just about having a family – it's about having something else in your life other than work. You need to give people flexibility to accommodate other things in their lives, whatever they may be. There is no single pattern of behaviour, we're all different and there shouldn't be a mould that everyone has to fit into. If you can acknowledge and address that, you'll get the most out of people. That's beneficial for the individual and it's beneficial for the business."

What advice would you offer to other women who aspire to senior positions?

"You have to find your own way through. Build a network within the company and outside it to share views and hear other perspectives. This is fundamental to gaining confidence and building your own view and voice.

"Women shouldn't assume that the gender equality battle has been won. It won't be until women's voices are heard equally in the workplace and in society. Don't deny that there is an issue here – acknowledge that experiences are different and from this, gain the confidence to speak out."