

# Spotlight on...

## Ese Adejuwon

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Office Manager, Actis,  
Lagos



Ese Adejuwon has held a variety of roles across banking, fast moving consumer goods and oil companies and currently is Office Manager in Actis Lagos. Ese holds degrees in administration and human resources. We talked to her about her career experiences and the importance of role models to raising ambitions.

#### Can you tell me about your career journey and how it has led you to your current position?

"I started my career 25 years ago in banking as an executive assistant to the CEO. That was really interesting because I got to see everything that went past the CEO's desk and so was a great learning experience. After that, I moved to Coca-Cola where I was in charge of projects, events and media contacts. It was at the time when Coca-Cola was a major partner in the government's effort to eradicate polio in Nigeria and AIDS had become a major health issue. I worked as a co-ordinator for the Coca-Cola Foundation, and, together with government officials, we ran awareness and prevention campaigns to promote public health. I also worked for a short spell at an oil company.

These experiences prepared me well for my role at Actis. I have a very varied job, co-ordinating the support services, from administration and IT through to the facilities, finance and HR. I do a bit of everything."

#### What kinds of challenge have you encountered in your career?

"Prior to joining the oil company, I did not do a proper evaluation of its company policy in relation to women and work-life balance before making the career move.

In retrospect, the warning signs were there – during my interview, many of the questions I was asked were related to

my plans for having more children. Two months into the job, I became pregnant and six months later, the company let me go. The unions had to get involved and I received compensation, but it was a very stressful experience."

#### So what needs to change to level the playing field, in your view?

"Companies need to consciously strive to present women with opportunities and support them to get to the top echelon by giving them a chance. Things have changed a bit, but there's still a long way to go. When I started out in the banking industry in Nigeria, it was common practice to get female employees to sign a document saying they won't get married or become pregnant for at least four years. Unsurprisingly, it was clear to me that the industry in general didn't invest in women.

"Attitudes still need to change quite a bit, but investing in training women will really help this because it allows us to show what we're really capable of."

#### Do you have a role model?

"Yes. The then country head, Adiba Ighodaro, at Actis Lagos when I first joined. She was my first female boss and I must admit that I was a bit scared – I thought it might be hard working for another woman. Actually, she turned out to be one of the best people I've worked for. She really

empowered me and encouraged me to take on more. She has left Nigeria now, but I still call her sometimes for advice or even for a chat.

"Nowadays, I see Funke Okubadejo, one of our real estate directors here at Actis, as my go-to person. She is an amazing mentor and I have learned a lot from her. I think female role models are very important because they help you see what's possible and give you a push to aim higher."

#### What attribute do you think has helped you along the way?

"I've learned to be very tenacious and resilient. There have been difficult times, but it's important to see that there is light at the end of the tunnel. I think it's really important to make the best of every opportunity that comes your way."

#### What advice would you offer to others?

"Get a mentor. I didn't do that early enough. The lessons you learn from a mentor will guide you through your career path. There is often no clear career track, especially in many of the roles traditionally taken by women, so you really need to work out where you want to be and then what steps you need to take to advance your career. And finally, don't focus on your failures, but do learn from them; focus on your goal instead."

