

Catherine Vaughan *Director General & Chief Operating Officer*



Department for International Trade

As a contribution to our week-long celebration of women, beginning with International Women's Day yesterday, Catherine kindly took the time out of what sounds like an incredibly busy schedule to speak to us about her experiences as a woman in the public sector, for which we are very grateful. Read on for a small insight into her world...

A precis

As a young woman, I wanted to either be the first female Test Match Special cricket commentator OR to work in Local Government. I began my career at PwC in their public services arm and established my footing as Executive Director of Finance and Resources at Brighton and Hove City Council. From there, I moved to HM Land Registry before the step that brought me to DIT as Director General and Chief Operating Officer, where I have been for three years.

What are the current challenges for women in your sector?

What sector do I work in? I am a finance professional, a civil servant and I work in the international trade arena. There are different challenges for each of these areas but I would love to see more women apply for senior jobs across the board, including for some of our roles based overseas. More generally, COVID has presented new challenges for everyone. These are unique to everyone's circumstances and aspirations – personal and in terms of their career. It's important not to draw extrapolations for particular groups. Crucial, at this time, is being attuned to individuals and to promote inclusion and diversity of talent in the workplace.

Is there anyone (male or female) who has inspired you in your career?

Chris Naylor – CEO of Birmingham City Council. He is also PwC alumni, which is where we met. He is passionate about great outcomes for citizens. He has tremendous energy and capacity for innovation. He is completely committed to diversity and inclusion and has always inspired me to go the extra mile and make a difference. He showed me that what we do as public servants is important and of great value.

In your experience, do women leaders bring different qualities to organisations than their male counterparts?

I have certainly seen and valued differences in leadership approaches and have worked for brilliant female and male leaders across my career. I have appreciated the perspective that people can bring to the workplace when they are striving to balance their work and their personal life. I also appreciate the perspective brought by women from diverse backgrounds and circumstances. It's really important to create an environment where difference is welcome.



How do you think the workplace could and should change for the better in the future for women?

I think that positive changes for women could be positive for everyone. It really depends on your job environment but for us, as predominantly office-based workers, there is a huge opportunity here but also some challenges. We have to look to a hybrid model – sustaining the best parts of flexible and remote working but also making face to face working truly collaborative to drive innovation. But not everyone can work effectively like this. Who are your colleagues? At what stage in their career are they? What flexibility do they have in reality to work in this agile manner? We must be really conscious this won't work for everyone.

What advice would you give to young women thinking about their careers?

Be curious. In the civil service, for example, there is such a huge range of roles working on fascinating and complex problems. Find out more. Be open-minded. In my career, I have been hugely privileged. If I had travelled a more linear path, I wouldn't have seen the same opportunities become available to me and I wouldn't be where I am now, part of an exciting and important international trade agenda.

For International Women's Day, DIT celebrated leadership by women at all levels within the organisation and remains committed to encouraging a diverse and inclusive ethos.

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