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International Women's Day: The now boring but more than ever necessary discussion

In the context of International Women's Day, International Accounting Bulletin speaks with RSM CEO Jean Stephens and Morison KSi CEO Liza Robbins, seeking their opinions on the pace of change to achieve gender parity, how it links to the broader diversity issues and their expectations from the next generations. Interview by Vincent Huck



RSM CEO, Jean Stephens



Morison KSi CEO, Liza Robbins

International Accounting Bulletin: In the past year, as you might have seen in our recently released world survey, seven CEO appointments were made in the accountancy industry. And most of these appointments were at the larger organisations– the top 10 networks associations. Interestingly, all those appointed were white and male. What are your thoughts about that? Any remarks on the fact that, well, seven appointments are made at the larger end of the spectrum and they're all men and they're all white?

RSM CEO Jean Stephens: Well, listen, could you start with a more difficult question?

Morison KSi CEO Liza Robbins: I was going to say I was glad you were going to answer that one, Jean.

Stephens: My goodness, my goodness, a very good question. Liza, do you want to comment first?

Robbins: It's a great disappointment; there's no question about that. As you said, there are seven appointments and there are no women. That is disappointing. Of course one would want to know the reasons behind it – one can't just make statements without knowing a little more behind it and who the candidates were etc, but initially it's disappointing.

Stephens: I think that's right. We really want to know what the candidate pool was, and then what the basis for the decisions was. And that takes it into the wider discussion, which is that's just a sign of where we are now, in terms of the wider leadership profession.

I would venture to say the pool didn't have a whole lot of women in it to begin with. If not a single woman came up that would mean the pool was not full of deemed-to-be-candidates with regard to the women. And then that's where my focus always is – until we get supply numbers up, then we're never going to change anything.

Robbins: I don't want to diffuse the conversation, because it's obviously for International Women's Day, but the issue of women in practice is also a question of diversity overall. You said they were white males.

There are issues specific to women, but there are also issues that relate to diversity in general. But Jean's point is correct –if you don't have the pool, you can't magic the number and that's across diversity as a whole. And it is recognised that it's not a problem of attracting females to our profession; there's a leak half way through before people get to the top.

International Accounting Bulletin: I think around 50% if not a bit more of accounting students are women. So where is the leak?

Stephens: I've been in this profession for a long time. I graduated a long time ago, and this conversation really is getting to be very boring now because we've been having it for so many years. So many years. When I was coming out of school, we were just coming up to the 50% mark.

So after all these years, after all the questioning of where the leak is– that question's been asked for over 30 years now – and we haven't figured out an answer.

Lots of smart people are working on it. There are many different aspects . The whole concept of working hard towards full diversity and inclusion is absolutely critical to a healthy business.

So it is not just the gender side of things, but diversity and inclusion as a whole. In the corporate language, discussion and agenda, it's much more top of mind, which is great.

But, if we get back to what has been happening for 30 years, we haven't made a substantial change. At some point, we have to say: "OK we don't have the answers, let's try something different."

Robbins: I'm wondering – and I don't want to make too provocative a statement – but we all agree, there is a supply at the entry level, and then there's this leak, and we're saying "We've been

discussing again and again where is it and we can't figure it out."

I wonder is it that we can't figure it out, or is it that we need to be just more committed to solving it? Because we know where the leaks are. We've allowed a slightly organic approach to dealing with this. Does there just need to be a more directional approach?

Stephens: Well, this takes us into the discussion of quotas, and/or tools, doesn't it? I look at quotas as a tool to get it done and to start to drive change by mandating it, if you will, and say: "We are going to do it." And then, as in all things in life, once you get used to something and you say "OK, it's not so bad and it brings other values and it brings other positives" and people adjust, then you don't need that tool any more.

So that's where I come into it. The counter arguments that then you're going to have fewer A class people ... I don't buy that.

Robbins: Nor do I.

Stephens: There are lots and lots of talented people out there and if there's a process whereby you say okay "OK preferential treatment's going to be given so that we can drive change in the longer term," then I think that's a healthy thing to do for the profession, for everyone.

Robbins: Yes, and it's a choice issue, isn't it? We can carry on as we are, and there are some very good programmes out there. Firms have introduced excellent types of flexible working, mentorship, all of which I commend.

Ultimately, while they'll speed up change, change may partly be generational, it may just be time, and we have to ask: "Are we prepared just to sit and wait?" And do we say "yes, we'll continue, we'll make these incremental improvements", or do we realise that we and business cannot sustain that, and change has to be faster? And probably we're getting towards the latter because, as you say, there simply are exceptional candidates out there.

Stephens: Yes, and it's just a matter of saying we are going to do it and as organisations we believe that diversity is so important we're just going to make it happen and choose to make it happen. And I don't think it's just generational because it's already been a generation. I learned from women before me, and so there were already very, very strong women in leadership positions then. So there's already been one generation of

the workforce, and the change isn't even close to where it needs to be. It isn't even close.

Robbins: I was reading the other day an article about crowdfunding, which said that the projects that are run by women are more successful than the projects run by men. So the proof is already out there. And these ultimately will be our firm's clients. So it must change, because it will flip in the other way if our clients don't recognise their advisers.

Stephens: And everyone needs to be involved in the conversation. This isn't a women's issue – it's everyone's issue. And, since men are the ones in charge in greater numbers, they need to carry more of the load in driving the change. Just because of the numbers, they're the ones at the table, not women.

So if you have men at the table then they're the ones who need to say "OK, we need to drive this through", and then that's where I think quotas and other tools will help, because it changes the conversation from "should we?" or "how should we?" to "we have to – now how are we going to get it done because we have to?"

And then over time that creates change and helps address issues such as unconscious bias.

Robbins: I agree. It would be a shame if it comes across as "this is a women's issue", because then it becomes divisive.

Stephens: It's not – it's a business issue.

Robbins: It's a sustainable business issue. And I know when we've worked on the concept of diversity our whole approach - and I think anyone sensible's approach - is that it's about inclusion, not exclusion, of anybody.

Stephens: Yes, it has to be inclusion.

Robbins: It must be. Because if not you can end up in a totally polarised world, which won't help us. There is so much agreement around this issue it's a shame when we look at our results.

International Accounting Bulletin: You both mentioned tools, and one of the tools you mentioned is quotas which, Jean, you've been advocating for quite a number of years now. So Liza, do you agree with quotas as a tool? What other tools could we use to advance and tackle the issue?

Robbins: In an ideal world, I don't like quotas, because they shouldn't be needed, and also some

might say: "Well you're only in that job because you're part of the quota." So in an ideal world we don't need quotas for anything, but we don't live in an ideal world. As we've said, we've seen the results, and we're not at a level that's acceptable for business.

So, in that sense, I would absolutely advocate the use of quotas, because it would just speed up the change and then the change will prove itself to be the correct approach. So, in that sense, I 100% agree with what Jean's saying.

Stephens: On the argument that one would question if someone is there because of merit or not, or the argument I've heard during discussions from both men and women that we shouldn't have quotas because we're only hiring the best regardless of gender, what I say is that there are lots of talented people out there and, sometimes I think you have to give people a break. I mean you have to for the greater good.

If the mission is to get a more representative leadership of our workforce – and that's what we're talking about, it's diversity and inclusion that is representative of the world that we're in – if we're going to get there then if someone told me, "Oh you're only in the position because of a quota," I'd say, "Well aren't I lucky that I got it? Now it's up to me to show how I'm worth it, and to use this opportunity to drive change and be part of that change and - help drive change as I go forward."

So I don't buy it. Even if someone said it to me that "you only got that position because they wanted a woman on it". I'd say, "Well OK, good, then I'm going to use it to drive that change and I'm going to use that opportunity and own it to leave a changed and a better world."

It's a weak argument and I think they're excuses to stay the same and not drive change because change is uncomfortable for everyone.

Robbins: Yes. And I think we are the proof in point. We've both delivered.

Stephens: Yes. I think so, I hope so but my focus is on the organisation, our agenda and our mission and what we need to do and bringing what talents I do have to bear and leading by example, but also to make sure that there's a great team around for those areas that need to be supplemented and with greater experience and that really works as a team.

That's what it's all about, so I would hope that people don't look at me as, "oh here's a female

leader”, because one, I’ve been doing it for a long time and two, it’s irrelevant – I’m a leader. And I’m doing the best that we can with the constraints and the opportunities that we have as an organisation.

So we really need to face the fact: we need to get the numbers up but also, once you get to that stage, it’s irrelevant and it should be irrelevant.

International Accounting Bulletin: Have each of you put in place tools within your respective organisations to advance this issue? You were talking earlier of the men being at the table, so they should carry the greater load. But you’ve both reached a level where you’re decision makers – you’re at the table. So what sorts of things are you putting in place to advance the situation?

Stephens: Well, we don’t use quotas within our organisation. But people are a key element of our strategy. We have seven elements in our strategy, with people being the number one. We have conversations about diversity and inclusion; that’s stated within our value sets, which all member firms have. So those type of programmes. At every conference, we talk about what the issues are.

On to awareness raising, we’re at that stage where we’re very open about the discussions. Many of our firms have programmes, very directed programmes of what they’re doing to address this issue. So it’s taken a higher step on our agenda as we go forward, and we talk about it at every single meeting and leading by example in that way.

Robbins: At Morison KSi – the global association itself, we are actually at the centre an all-female team – but that has not been by design. We haven’t just recruited females because they’re females, it’s genuinely been just recruiting the best people.

In terms of our governance at Morison KSi, we have a number of boards – they are undergoing a change at the moment and we are looking to improve our own diversity. Something we discussed earlier is that we can only appoint candidates from our own member firms as directors and, if the pool is not diverse, then that’s the challenge for us. This is what we’re finding at the moment, but it’s something that’s absolutely top of mind.

And again within our firms there are a whole lot of different tools, whether it is enhanced maternity pay or something else. Just a comment I have: we have a good and attractive maternity pay. I was quite shocked when I just asked my peers, very

informally – it wasn’t a formal study: “Could you just share with me your maternity policies and pay?” and they were statutory. I found that very disappointing.

But within our firms there is good maternity pay. And something that is a very powerful tool and is increasing is the whole pay parity reporting, not just in our industry, but across the whole of the commercial world. That’s very important, that the issue is quantified – then people know what they’re dealing with.

Stephens: Maybe we can get to the pay discussion next. We have enhanced maternity pay. We have about 35 staff now, and I think we’re just about 50:50 male and female. And, again, I want it to be balanced. We were at a point where we had more women as we’ve grown, and I said: “OK it’s healthier to have this balance because you have those different views.”

When we’re recruiting, it’s not just looking in isolation at that role and bringing the best person in for that role, it’s bringing the best person in for the team, and that includes diversity.

That includes “let’s bring in these different viewpoints, different approaches”, because it’s healthy for everyone to have that. So I’m very proud that we have this 50% balance, and I encourage the diversity and those views that come through that.

It’s really having it top of mind, but you do have to have the supply and demand. And that’s where I’ve been thinking a lot about the gender pay gap and thinking, “How does this happen?” Because, certainly in my experience, I’ve never felt, “you’re a female so we’re going to pay you less for the same job”.

I don’t think corporates have been doing that for a long time. For the most part, they haven’t been doing that, but it’s a manifestation in my mind that, if the men are at the top and when they’re at the top they have that higher pay., that’s where the gender pay gap typically is coming in. Not equal pay for equal work. We need to remember what these numbers are telling us. They’re just showing us something that we already know.

International Accounting Bulletin: Do you have equal pay in your organisations between genders?

Stephens: Sure. Yes, and we have had equal pay for equal work for a long time. It’s a role so, you look at the role and that market, and it never would enter my mind that there’s a female and a

male and a disparity between that. But you then have different roles and you have more senior roles and it is changing, but many times the senior roles are of course held by men, who have more experience.

That's where that leak that Liza referred to earlier, when you have that leak, you don't have the female contingent rising, and that creates the gender pay gap, in my opinion.

Robbins: You're absolutely right and, again, like you, I've never felt oh, "you're female so I think what we'll do is calculate 10% less". It's a nonsense to suggest people have actively been doing that. But you're correct – if more senior people are male, then men simply will be paid more.

Stephens: But I do think having the numbers on the table and having them being reported is another good tool for trying to get that down. We have to get more women in the higher paid positions to drive down that gap. Raising the awareness and having transparency that's very healthy.

Robbins: What I often find interesting is this topic can be top of mind in some countries or regions or cultures and they really say the right things, and it's all great stuff. And then you look at the figures. I did that recently – it was when you published the International Accounting Bulletin World Survey – and, looking at some of the figures around the personnel, I was very shocked in some regions.

The regions that maybe I would predict to be higher weren't. This is interesting because the conversation seems to be fine there but the reality isn't, and that's why I think these gender pay gap reports are rather useful – they start the conversation.

International Accounting Bulletin: Your roles obviously come with a lot of international travelling and exposure to multicultural environments because of the nature of your organisations. From one region to the other, from one culture to the other, how do you experience these issues?

Stephens: From my perspective is, one, I try to lead by example. And I've often heard some of our firms and some of our partners say, "Well the young women don't feel like they have a role model within the organisation." So, if they're trailblazers within the firm, then how do they manoeuvre and how do they lead through the time of life when they want to have a family or they want to have a career break? How do we encourage them to come back in after that time?

And if they're the first who are doing it, then everyone needs to learn. So women need to figure it out and have those conversations with the employers, and the employers and the leaders in those organisations need to be open to say, "let's have a conversation, what do you need on this?" and then to adjust and figure out how to do it.

Some cultures are just entering that. So what I do is, one, I always have a conversation with the firms. Now, I don't want it to become my issue, and people saying "OK here is Jean again talking about the issue because she's a female". That's not what my viewpoint is. My viewpoint is diversity is healthy for any firm, because it brings in different views and different approaches and that makes everyone better.

So I approach it from a pure business standpoint. Right now we might measure it but we don't mandate anything. As of yet, we don't look at it that way. But we do monitor it and we do talk to our firms about it and we do have discussions.

Culturally it is different. Whether it's in Latin America or in our Middle East countries, they do have differences in approach and that's societal. And I don't think it's going to change overnight; it's going to be a process.

I also think globalisation and the internationalisation of our world helps.

My final thought on this is that our clients are also experiencing it. So, at some point, our clients will want to be served by very diverse people, and that will also help change.

Robbins: When I travel abroad, it is not at the top of my mind that I'm female at all. The only time it would cross my mind is if I would be entering a country that has particular dress codes for reasons of culture, and then of course I pay respect to the culture, but I don't think: "Oh gosh I'm a female leader and I'm now going to X region." I go as the CEO of Morison KSi and I'm business focused on the matters that we're dealing with.

So I can't say it particularly leads my every day or my travels. I won't say I'm not aware of it but it's not a burning issue for me – I'm simply a CEO and a leader.

International Accounting Bulletin: A lot of issues we just talked about go beyond the accountancy industry itself, so in the context of Women's Day which... Well that's actually a question: do you like the idea of a women's day and do you do anything in your organisation to celebrate it?

But then these types of days in general are to sort of reflect on the road that has been travelled and the road ahead. So, in that spirit, do you see any progress over the years? Jean, I think you said it's starting to be a boring discussion because it's always the same thing. So do you see progress or, to the contrary, are we regressing or is it status quo year on year?

Stephens: Yes, I do think it's boring, but it is necessary. We have to keep going with it. I tend to be a glass half full kind of person on the whole but on this I don't see a lot of progress, I don't, but I'm very hopeful for the generation coming after. When I'm talking to my nieces and nephews, it's almost a non-issue for them. It's a different frame of mind, which is great. They don't see it as an issue – they don't really see why it's on the agenda.

This is both the men and the women, so the young men, the young professionals coming out, are used to working women around them. That could play out in two different ways: one, it could really generate that pool of people and it becomes a non-issue and we not only have diversity, but we also welcome and expect very, very diverse teams in any area of our life, which would be great.

The other way could be that people just say, "We're not going to fight those battles," and it just closes down. But it's yet to be seen. And it's not just our profession of course, it true for other professions and industries and the dialogue's happening outside the corporate world also.

Robbins: With regard to International Women's Day, it's a great day. I would like the day to be a celebration of everything that has been achieved, but the issue is it's still a recognition of so much we need to achieve. And, in that sense, it would be great when we don't need that day, except as a retrospective celebration, but that is not where we are yet.

Stephens: I agree that it would be good to get to the point where we do say, "Well no, we don't need it and we shouldn't have it." But the theme of this year's International Women's Day is "Press for progress".

You asked if there has been substantial progress and we're not talking five years, we're talking at least 30 years of working on this. And, in my opinion, we need to expect and demand faster progress.

Robbins: To pick up on a point you made about the future generations, I'm also rather optimistic.

I had a wonderful conversation not that many weeks ago with my mother, who's in her 80s and my niece who's in her teens. My mother was talking about her world and the expectations of women, I should say, the no expectations of women. And even things that would have been legal for her to do, society's expectation was that she simply wouldn't be doing them. Then I discussed how my world went, which had changed rather substantially. It's not without its issues, but it has changed rather substantially, and my niece could hardly understand the conversation.

She was scratching her head, thinking, "what are we actually discussing?" because she's top of her class, she's top of the family, she's got lots of female role models and she sees the world very differently.

What would be interesting for you is an interview of three generations of women to see: no we're not satisfied with where we are, but have we made progress? Yes.

Stephens: That's right, but we have to be careful not to just say then "OK it's going to happen anyway". Because I don't think that's necessarily the case.

Robbins: Well, I think the rate of change of business, as we all know, is fast, so we can't afford to just sit around and see if things change. We don't let other things just change, do we? We don't let the training of our staff just be this slightly slow process whereby we sit and wait to see if it happens – we put our full force behind it because our businesses require it.

Stephens: Where I'm hopeful is the younger generation just won't stand for it. If companies aren't moving and don't have the environment that they want, they'll just move on to others that do. So it's a high corporate imperative that we get this right so that we can always have the best and the brightest, irrespective of gender. Companies are starting to see that and starting to really work hard on that, and that's where the diversity inclusion comes in.

Robbins: Also the new generations see work differently and they won't work through the night, sleeping on the floor. This work-life balance is real. We have the technology to change the environment that we have to work in, and that will support a lot of issues that potentially have held back women or have encouraged women to leave our profession. So there are, hopefully, other reasons why our environment could become more friendly.

International Accounting Bulletin: Jean, you mentioned the #MeToo campaign, and obviously the past few months have been quite remarkable in terms of feminism activism, especially around the issues of sexual harassment in the wake of the Weinstein scandal. And this has snowballed into a broad discussion and debates around gender equality and the relationship between men and women in society in general, but also in business.

It hasn't always been met with consensus, even by women themselves. There was, for example, the now infamous column of Catherine Deneuve in the French newspaper. So how do you both reflect on those few months and those divergences within the feminism movement?

Robbins: Oh, goodness. Wow. On the positive side, it has brought more of this to the forefront, which has got to be good. Of course, using celebrity names brings the issue right to the forefront. And it also says: "Look, it's not just in your world that this is happening – it's across the globe." It's in every sector – it's in every field. I think it's a negative, but it's also positive, because there's recognition – it's out there.

Where we have to be careful is, and I used the words earlier, we've got to be careful that we don't use any of these campaigns to polarise us all, rather than bringing us together, as that would be a shame. But I'm positive about things being in the open.

Stephens: I'm a big believer in transparency and openness, and that talking about it and having these discussions is absolutely critical. Certainly in the work environment, the safety and the comfort and that people feel respected at all times is critical. So we have to go through this but, if people are talking about this as a change and no more, then it isn't going to happen as we go forward.

But it can only be good. We need to not be extra sensitive, taking it to the point that we know when it's comfortable or not if someone tells you, "Oh, you look nice today," versus something said in a different way with different intent.

So how you legislate or regulate intent then that becomes the issue and we need to be careful not to go to the extreme. But having the dialogue, having the discussion, absolutely. I think it's healthy.

Robbins: And a lot of the dialogue has been about why people haven't come forward, either when they've been a victim of something or whether

they've known something has gone on. Now that the dialogue is out there, more people will come forward, because a lot of time people don't want to be first, particularly if they're going against someone powerful.

So in that sense it is good, and if it's an open conversation and people are saying, "this behaviour is just not acceptable," then when people see it again they're more likely to come forward, whatever their role may be.

Stephens: Which leads me to a thought: an interesting part of the discussion is the abuse of power – and when is that in force? One of the articles was talking about if you're going to get to the top of the entertainment industry you have to be very forceful – otherwise, you're not going to get anything done. This article was talking about the sexual allegations, but it was more about bullying type of behaviours.

But as we look at the traits of CEOs, and as evidence emerges that it's not really these high charisma type of CEOs who are getting the best results, it plays into this whole argument.

That's interesting to me. I don't think there's an answer yet but the fact we're having this dialogue and these issues are being brought out and discussed, whether it's abuse of power or ways of leadership, that's intellectually very interesting. And very good for us to reflect, think about and consider.

Robbins: Absolutely and for me and throughout my life, whether it be in my professional or private life, I simply see people broadly as: do they share my ethical and my value system or not? I don't really care what flavour they are to be quite honest. So, linking it to the whole abuse of power, it doesn't matter whether you're female, you're male, where you're from, what age you are, it's irrelevant. Abuse of power and some of the things we're seeing are really moral and ethical issues to their core.

Stephens: We talk about the extremes and in the papers now in the headlines there are all these extreme behaviours. But what's interesting are the least extreme instances, because for the most part I don't think people set out to say, "OK, now I'm in a position of power now I'm going to go in this direction," or "To get things done, I'm going to exert my power in a way that then becomes abusive."

That's really interesting and I think we need to keep up the discussion on that. And I guess you

would say it changes for people through their working life.

Robbins: And all of us are in a community of some sort. I could only abuse power if the people around me allowed me to do it. So it's not just me – it's an issue of the whole culture.

Stephens: Absolutely.

Robbins: It's the old adage isn't it –evil happens when good people do nothing. Because there will always be people out there who are people we wish we didn't have but we do have them, but you can always keep them in check if good people do something.

Stephens: Yes, I agree.

International Accounting Bulletin: To go back to the original question: the #MeToo campaign – some argue it is a disservice to the women's cause. You don't agree with that?

Stephens: No. I absolutely don't, I think it's healthy to discuss it, and I always think with this type of discussion it's in the eye of the beholder. If someone feels uncomfortable, then they feel uncomfortable. If they feel it's inappropriate, then it is. Now, for the most part, I'm sure there are accusations out there which weren't the intent and we've seen that play out in the news. Someone didn't intend it and you can read it. OK they didn't intend that. So being aware of how we're affecting other people from that point of the discussion is important. It's really about being aware of how we're affecting other people and being more self-aware. That's where it starts at a base level and then it gets into the more sinister elements of it, which is the proper abuse and those things that need to be dealt with legally.

Robbins: I agree. Whether you wish to support the #MeToo campaign or not, we're talking about it, and that's the whole point of it, that the campaign is getting us talking. It's getting people thinking about it, it's getting people discussing a lot of these issues, and that has to be a good thing.

International Accounting Bulletin: You were saying earlier that acting as a role model in your position is an important tool as well. So what's your advice to young professionals coming into the accountancy industry, and would your advice be different to young female professionals starting their career in another industry?

Robbins: My advice would be this is a fantastic career – embrace it. Accounting is a fantastic

qualification to have to set you up for your life and the accounting industry provides an excellent career. So I would embrace it.

One very positive impact has been technology in one way because there are the gender pay gap surveys out there. There are blogs, there are forums, so you can see into firms a lot more now and you can decide which of those firms you feel aligned to and which ones you don't. And you can look very openly at partner profiles and so on and so forth and you can find a firm that suits you.

So my advice would be this is a fantastic industry to be a part of and I would encourage all young people, including women, to embrace it, but just choose the firms that you work for carefully, because there will be a firm that is aligned to you.

Stephens: What mine would be ... Well, first of all, I agree. I think the accounting profession – whether it's auditing, tax, anything – it's a set-up for life so we're blessed with that.

And my advice is really very simple, and has worked for me, which is just to work very, very hard at what you do. No one's going to give it to you and if you don't work hard, somebody else is going to do it and they're going to take it.

So whether it's men or women, it's the same thing. It's just get out there and do the hard work and then, if you do that, then you gain the skills and you can have those choices of where you want to go in the way that you can have the work life balance and you can design, based on those skills, the life that you want.

But it's not going to come magically, and it doesn't come when you have a degree and it doesn't come by waiting for somebody to give it to you.