

INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTINA ANAGNOSTOPOULOU

Edited by Elena Sarati



WOMEN AND WORK

Interview with women in top management

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Editorial Staff: Giuseppe Andriolo, Giovanni Gaetano Reale, Lauro Mattalucci, Elena Sarati, Tiziana Teruzzi, Antonio Zanardo.

Scientific Director: Lauro Mattalucci

Editor-in-chief: Elena Sarati

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On the cover Sofonisba Anguissola, *The Chess Game*, or *Portrait of the artist's sisters playing chess*, 1555, oil on canvas, 72x97 cm., 1555, Narodowe Muzeum, Poznań, Poland.

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Christina, can you describe your career and the most important steps and encounters, those which represented a turning point?

«My career was based on family choices. After my Master at LSE (*MSc Human Resources, Human Resources and Business Application of the HR processes*) in London, I had great opportunities ahead of me. At this point I fell in love with an Italian boy. I decided to come to Rome, where I started from an internship. Then I worked in a consultancy firm for many organizations and in companies like GE, UniCredit, Vodafone and Techint.

However, I always looked for a balance between the reasons of my heart and my professional development. So the right word is “balance” – I wanted and found a third way, because I don’t think that an important part of our life should be sacrificed. The main thing is to be happy, our well-being. Later, again, I decided not to leave to take up an important role. I did it to stay with my partner, but in any case I looked for another position more satisfying than the one I had».

What was necessary, in your opinion, to reach high levels of responsibility?

«I don’t believe in “luck”. An important point is, when it is possible, to select your bosses, to evaluate. It is always necessary to try to have a choice, focusing on our ambitions (the potential starts from that – the search for self-improvement). This was for me the turning point.

I became an executive at thirty. In UniCredit I was the youngest, and a foreign woman. A situation by no means easy, but I worked a lot on self-limiting questions like “Will I be up to it?” Skills are important, but if we have the motivation, the break-even of skills is quick. We need to listen to our motivations, to dare and to choose».

Were there some situations in which you had difficulties as a woman? How did you feel and how did you overcome them? By doing what? What were the advantages, if there were any?

«The advantages are many. Leveraging on diversity and on being foreign always played into my hands, provided that I looked for the company able to appreciate and empower me.

On the other hand there is bias against foreigners – like me – quite young, with experiences in other countries, in different organizations, and speaking four languages. All those aspects make a difference, but also transmit that there is not a specific identity. In my opinion it is important to identify the bias and intervene personally, exposing yourself, speaking out, clarifying.

I think diversity has to be defended mainly by those who are different».

You are an HR Director. What does it mean playing this role? Today what must characterize the people strategy?

«I think that the role of HR Director, local or global, must give the people a reason for staying in the company, create a values’ “environment” where the workers find a reason for coming to work. Europ Assistance is a company based on “caring” and I would like to be remembered for that, because I acted in a “caring” way, I paid attention to health and prevention, to flexibility, to diversity, understood promotion of individual differences (not only and not so much related to categories). My role must take care of the emotional part of people, because it makes the difference in engagement, and therefore in performances too».

¹ Human Resources and Organization Chief of Europ Assistance since June 2017. Interview given in Milan, on 29 March 2019.

From your point of view, as a woman, could a greater presence of women – as indicated in Italy for Boards in the Golfo-Mosca law² – make a difference, and in what?

«There have been lots of discussions about numbers. But I would create more sustainable conditions at the low levels, rather than creating positions at top levels. I think role modelling (not forced) is useful, but I would worry less about the top and more about middle management, then the top follows it.

In addition, I believe in promotion of diversity in a wider sense, not only linked to specific categories, like those of gender, but to the diversity of frames and points of view, avoiding a surplus of cultural homogeneity. The stronger bias is, in effect, the affinity bias. We are attracted by those who are like us and it could be a limit. I believe strongly in a diversity based on backgrounds, on different ways of acting and thinking».

Which suggestions would you give a woman who would like to take up a career?

«First of all I suggest to eliminate the idea that the domestic or familiar jobs are a female prerogative. Spending time outside the home is not a sacrifice, but a sort of equilibrium (I would use this word more than “work-life balance”). This static idea of the feminine role is part of the obligations assimilated unconsciously. If all mums take their daughters to school every morning and I don't, I shouldn't have feelings of guilt. The motivation in taking up the career must be explained to our children and partner, given value and respected.

Those who love us are proud of our successes, personal and professional. Last time when my daughter's teacher asked her “When does your mum come back?”, she answered “Mum always comes back!” This is my victory».

² This law in force since 2011 obliges publicly listed companies to reserve one third of places on their boards to women.