Women in work: Preparing Women for the Fourth Industrial Revolution

Monday 12 July 2021, 3-4pm via Zoom

Chair: Laura Farris MP, Co-Chair of the Women and Work APPG

Guest speakers:

Helen Milner OBE, CEO, Good Things Foundation
Sheila Flavell CBE, Chief Operating Officer, FDM Group
Michaela Neild, External Affairs Manager, Google
Professor Kerensa Jennings, Senior Adviser, Digital Impact, BT

Minutes

Co-chair of the Women and Work APPG, Laura Farris MP convened the meeting, welcoming the guest speakers and attendees. Laura explained that the role of technology, IT, artificial intelligence (AI) and automation requires greater awareness, particularly, the effects on the labour market in the decades ahead, but also quite specifically what it means for women's employment. Laura explained that there will be some industries which may or may not have positive ramifications for women. Laura also said that there will be sectors where AI will struggle to emulate humans, such as psychotherapy, as careers involved with emotion are the hardest for robots to engage in.

Laura then introduced the first speaker, **Helen Milner OBE, CEO, Good Things Foundation.**

Helen began by explaining that the Good Things Foundation is a digital inclusion charity. Helen then said that she was going to discuss the link between digital exclusion and social exclusion, so that women aren't left behind as the world of work becomes more digitised. She said that the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated digital exclusion, with millions of people affected due to the digital divide and that digital skills, devices and data are extremely important.

Helen explained that according to the essential digital skills for life and for work framework, 52% of the working age population have no digital skills for work, which is just over half over the working age population. She explained that the Lloyds consumer digital index is expected to be published in the Autumn, and that the Good Things Foundation are hoping that that the percentage would have decreased, as people have become more familiar with technology during the pandemic.

Helen further explained that during the pandemic, one and a half million more adults have gone online, however there still are 14.9 million adults who have basic digital engagement and 82% of jobs require digital skills. Helen explained that digital exclusion been a big issue during the pandemic, using an example of a woman in her 50s who contacted their organisation last April, because she had been told by her employer to work from home and didn't know how to work from home.

Helen explained that people who are digitally excluded and lack digital skills tend to struggle financially or be older in age. Helen noted that 39% of people who have low digital skills are under the age of 60. Helen said the primary reason for digital exclusion isn't age, it's income and the associated social disadvantages such as low educational attainment, low household income, insecure housing and unemployment.

Helen then explained that in the UK, digital exclusion slightly tilts to the female population, due to the demographics of women living longer than men. She explained that globally however, digital exclusion and social exclusion are much higher for women.

Helen said that the Good Things Foundation help people to cross the digital divide through a range of projects and programmes where digital inclusion is embed into activities and blended with their online learning platform. She said they have hyperlocal partners who work exclusively with women, particularly with women for whom English is their second language and struggle financially. Helen explained that the Good Things Foundation have three recommendations for policymakers, the first is that digital inclusion should be a national priority. Secondly, that digital inclusion needs to be included as part of work into employability alongside work and career programmes. Lastly, the role of community organisations needs to be recognised as part of that ecosystem.

Laura thanked Helen for her contribution and noted that she was fascinated by the statistic that nearly 40% of those who are digitally excluded are under the age of 60. Laura then introduced the next speaker, **Sheila Flavell CBE, Chief Operating Officer, FDM Group.**

Sheila began by explaining that women are underrepresented across the stem sector, and that the industry is self-aware of the diversity barrier. Sheila said that diversity should not be seen as a project that requires a cultural mindset shift, instead change needs to be systemic and coordinated, not a set of disparate of initiatives by different employers.

Sheila said that by 5050, it's expected that there will be twice as many people over the age of 65, as there will be under the age of 65, in Europe. Sheila explained that there is a shrinking talent pool and organisations need to make the most of the talent that they do have, and hold on to them. Sheila also said that 50% of the UK population comprises of women, and this also needs to see this reflected in the tech sector as existing employment practices can unintentionally exclude female talent. Sheila explained that organisations need to be more inclusive and attract women back into business after they've had maternity leave or after they've returned to work following a break. Sheila explained that It's not as difficult getting women in at entry level, however it's much more difficult to retain them once they have caring responsibilities for either children or relatives. Sheila explained that there's a myriad of roles available to women, however the tech industry can be intimidating for those looking to get into the sector and there is often a lack signposting to allow women to find them.

Sheila further explained that at FDM they recruit around 2500 people per year, and 31% of, of the people employed are women, which she explained is above the industry average.

She said that FDM have 15 vocational training programmes that prepare permanent employees for 150 different roles across 200 of their client companies in the tech sector. Sheila explained that FDM are fortunate enough to have a zero gender pay gap that surprisingly Covid had actually had a positive impact on the gap. Sheila said she wanted to report this this year to send out a positive message to people applying to FDM that they are doing it because it's the right thing to do, not because the government has asked. Sheila believed that the positive impact was due to their returners programme, offering six months' pay for women going off on maternity or adoption leave, an active mentoring scheme with a clear visibility of female role models, increased annual leave entitlement and offered greater flexibility to working arrangements. Sheila said FDM currently have 150 returners working for them.

Sheila said people want to join a company that has a positive workplace culture to encourage collaboration, that embraces and celebrates diversity and offers effective and sustainable solutions, covering all aspects of the organisation, people, processes and culture. They want to see a board that looks like them, and in particular women need to see that your company is an enabler, not an inhibitor, and she said speaking as a returner and a mother of five children, that this is what women need and want and demand.

Laura thanked **Sheila,** and welcomed FDM's model of good practice, highlighting the flexibility in the moving work force, the desirability of a zero-pay gap and the training offered. Laura then introduced the next speaker, **Michaela Neild, External Affairs Manager, Google.**

Michaela began by explaining Google's mission, which is to organise the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful. She said that underpins why Google make an investment in removing barriers for people to be able to make the most of the digital economy and try close those equality gaps. Michaela said that Google conducted a series of research ahead of the pandemic and found that less than 1% of all funding for start-ups goes to all women teams, in comparison to 90% of all male teams that receive the funding. She said the work that Google were doing three years ago with "Google for start-ups", 40% of the funding was going to women owned businesses and that Google are working actively to try improve that figure.

Michaela explained that at a school age, 70% of boys are more confident in learning computer science in comparison to 60% of girls. Google have invested in a project called "Google computer science first" which aims to reach the free computer science curriculum to as many children as possible, particularly girls and those from ethnic minority groups. She explained that they have also launched the Global Fund to support women and girls, which is a $25 million investment into local community groups to improve and support gender equality projects around the world. In 2015, Google launched the digital garage programme, which offers free digital skills training for all adults. Michaela noted that BT and the Good Things Foundation have been long partners of this programme. The programme offered in person digital skills training pre -covid, through high street hubs and found that 60% of women attended the in-person training. She also spoke of an internal Google programme to try and encourage more women into leadership roles called "I Am remarkable".

She then explained a new programme called Google Career certificates, in partnership with the Department for Work and Pensions. Google have invested in entry level training programmes called Google Career tickets, on IT support, data analytics, project management and user experience design. She explained that they are designed to take somebody from being able to use a computer to being able to deliver that job within a month to six weeks. Google partnered with the Department for Work and Pensions to allow 9000 jobseekers to take the courses for free. She explained that Google has also partnered with the Prince's Trust and INC Academy to offer 1500 free scholarships, which have built in extra support, including provisions for childcare.

Laura thanked **Michaela** and praised Google for the free opportunities they are delivering in order to help people develop digital skills. Laura then introduced the final speaker **Professor Kerensa Jennings, Senior Adviser, Digital Impact, BT.**

Kerensa began by highlighting the recent [research](#) of The female lead, which revealed that women are socially conditioned to feel less entitled than men in all areas of their lives, and socially conditioned to expect less and demand less. Kerensa then explained with or without automation, this creates an employment gap between women and men, leading to inequalities in pay, domestic load, childcare, parental care and unpaid work, which she said mainly falls on women. She said the system can intentionally or inadvertently exploit and benefit from this entitlement gap, which widens when women from marginalised backgrounds and intersectionality are factored in.

Kerensa then raised data found by Elena Mills, the former editor of The Sunday Times Magazine. Half of women aged 45 to 65 in the UK are the main breadwinners in their family and nearly half of women, compared to 35% of men, are feeling burnt out by the pandemic. In 2019, women over 40 began to earn more than women under 40 for the first time. Midlife women are behind 90% of consumer decisions, and 50% of actual purchases. Kerensa explained the societal power that the "midlife cohort of women" hold.

Kerensa said at BT, they are continually innovating and doing their best to enrich lives across the UK and beyond. BT skills for tomorrow, was set up in 2019 and like Google, invests in helping people with confidence and skills to make the most of life in the digital world for free. Kerensa said they are aiming to help 25 million people by 2026 have already made good progress, helping 10 million people so far.

She explained that automation and digital advances are shifting job market demand away from routine, low and middle level jobs to higher level, analytical, technical and managerial jobs. Kerensa explained that on the supply side, equipping workers with skills that complement the new technologies has lagged, hindering the pace of change and workforce adaptability. She highlighted a recent report published by [future dot now](#), which found that the essential digital skills gap, which is largely viewed as a social issue, actually has a vital business angle and that addressing it is fundamental to business recovery, productivity and prosperity. Kerensa said that at BT they want to be part of the solution and are doing good work in that space.

<u>Q&A</u>

Laura thanked all attendees and panellists and introduced the Q&A. She kicked off the Q&A by asking Michaela about the investment gap and start-ups, particularly within the tech industry and asked why there is an investment disparity between a male run business and a female business. She asked is it because men are more likely to have skills in technology and digital that would lead them to create a better brand than women.

Michaela responded by saying that it was more complex than you might think on paper. What she found works well for start-ups in being able to combat these challenges is mentoring female led businesses to navigate these structural problems, support them with confidence issues or address gaps in digital skills. She said that mentoring and actually being able to support women led businesses on a one-to-one basis has been the most effective at being able to change that trend.

Laura read out a question from the chat box from Dr Liz Hind, which was what can be done to ensure that women don't just get the jobs of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, but help shape it by creating those jobs and starting their own business?

Karensa responded saying there are lots of things to do to get going, even HMRC can help with grants for small businesses and start-ups, its about doing your research really carefully. She said if you want to employ women and proactively make sure that you're helping create the future pipeline is really important that you proactively help provide those opportunities and help create those opportunities. She said half the challenge is getting the idea off the ground, getting the proof of concept, getting people to fall in love with the idea, and then developing the skills you require in the digital marketplace. She highlighted there are lots of different tips, tricks, guides and courses you can do which are completely free and help you take that next step.

Helen went on to say that one of the problems is that a lot is that businesses don't recognise who their customers are and their consumers, and don't involve them through the codesign of that.

Michaela then stated that it's exciting to see lots of small businesses use the opportunity in the last 15 months to set up from scratch in their living room and suddenly start shipping out hand made materials. One thing she flagged was one to one mentoring for small businesses and charities through our partnership with digital boost and the importance of having a person at the end of the phone to help.

Laura went on to ask to the best of your knowledge, when you look at younger women, under the age of 25, is it your view that their participation in all aspects of STEM is broadly equal to their male equivalents, or do you think that there's still a shortfall among younger women, or do you not have that information? Is it an of the moment problem or whether it's a structural problem?

Sheila responded to say this is stuff we live and breathe, she gave the example that she gets 100,000 applications to join FDM every year, and from that they whittled it down to a

two and a half thousand people. She said that 31% of our people are women and one of the key issues is that there are many fewer women studying STEM at university than men and that's down to interest. A solution to that she suggested was to make a programme degree agnostic, so any degree could be used to apply, and the assessment process was used to determine candidates, rather than course or degree. She went on to say that women are much more frightened of technology, and you have to take a soft approach to encourage them in.

Helen came in to say that despite all the amazing work by those on the panel, there is a problem with girls and women going into digital careers. Even if we think of them as the Instagram generation, they're much more likely to be comfortable using technology, but that doesn't mean that they're thinking about careers in technology, and that we massively have a diversity issue in the tech sector and it needs systemic, cultural change, so we have to recognise this isn't going away without some real action.

Laura said that the better the training you've had at the beginning, the more likely you are to be leading the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Karensa came in to say that what often happens is that, by primary age, boys and girls have an equal interest in discovery, experimentation, failing, not really caring if we get it right or wrong, just having fun with it. And then as they gradually get older, something happens when they're in school, where girls tend to lose their confidence more and girls can be a bit more reticent in the classroom. She agrees with Sheila that strength-based assessments are far more useful. She said that rethinking the curriculum to incentivize the system to recognise the strengths that Sheila is looking for when she recruits is a far better way of looking at the pipeline into the world of work.

Laura came back in to say that someone in the chat quoted Melinda Gates and stated the way to progress gender equality is to get more women in tech, to impact innovation and finance, to control money and politics, to set the law and control the cultural story. To promote gender equality, they need to have better access to believers of power. She stated the final question is can we attempt to challenge discourse that women are afraid of tech as this perpetuates the notion that women are lacking, some people are afraid. There are many more sexist attitudes and structural barriers for women, than fear of tech.

Michaela came in to say that her job is at a digital company, but her degree is in politics. And increasingly you may need some level of digital skills within those new tech jobs, but a lot is about digitising some of those softer communication skills that we might have had before.

Laura came in to round off and thanked all the speakers for their fascinating insights and interesting areas of work.