

Clore Provocation Claire Hodgson
Women and cultural leadership

Re-imagining the workplace

"It seems to me that there are lots and lots of different ways to lead, and from where I stand, I can see thousands of women in the arts getting on with it and doing brilliant things. Some of them are looking at the ladder that leads to the directorship of big cultural institutions and are climbing up it (and I salute them), but other women I know are looking at that ladder, dismantling it and making it into other things: bridges, bicycles, rafts and communication devices." –[Lizzie Crump in her recent Guardian blog](#)

I run my own arts organisation, Diverse City, founded six years ago. In this provocation, I want to examine the stories and backgrounds of some of the women I am currently employing, because they provide a useful insight into the bigger picture of women and cultural leadership. These stories illuminate why many women are dismantling the ladder that stretches up to the jobs running the major cultural institutions in the UK. Only a minority of these institutions are run by women (in fact, less than a third). This provocation will argue that women are taking themselves out of the race and avoiding the ladder altogether because the arts has yet to appreciate the value of flexible working.

Woman A, aged 52, is a highly-experienced project manager working the equivalent of one day per week split over a number of days. Some weeks she works 2 hours per day, sometimes two half-days, others three days. In truth, I know nothing about how she organises her time. Her pay is based on completing defined tasks, not the days she works. She is a single parent with two teenage children, living 200 miles away from me and from the project we are organising. When a show is in production, she will work more hours and move to the show's location. We communicate in the evenings via email, and I travel to see her (or vice versa) once monthly. When time is tight, we use Skype instead of in-person visits.

Our production manager (Woman B) is also in her fifties. We will start each production by negotiating her fee, once she has looked at the size of the job. As with Woman A, "success" is defined by tasks completed rather than days worked. Similarly, I won't know how many hours she works. We work entirely on a remote basis. Her home base is a 3-hour train journey away from mine. With elderly parents, her work needs to be flexible, especially as one is frequently admitted to hospital.

Aged 40, Woman C has a chronic health condition which precludes any travel. She undertakes marketing and social media work for our company without leaving her home. She is paid a fee for her work and she works to generous timescales to allow for periods of illness.

Another key aspect of our work is that we are entirely remote (we don't have an office), cloud-based (we share files online) and paperless. As the CEO, I also work on a flexible basis, regularly taking time off to care for my mother or my young child.

Flexible working is distinct from part-time working, in that it doesn't involve working set hours (timing or number). Part-time jobs don't always help with caring commitments, because children can't arrange to only be ill when you're not working. People working flexibly may be working 40 hours a week or 20.

These women that I employ have all worked for 20-30 years within their specialist fields of project arts management, production, and marketing. We share in common that we are female and have caring responsibilities for parents, children or both. Two of the women are disabled. One is hearing-impaired, and one has a long term-health condition. More importantly, we share in common that we are experienced leaders and innovators in our fields, but none of us could currently work in a large cultural institution because we need complete flexibility around when and how we work.

"Across the creative and cultural sector, there are 32,800 female leaders and 82,450 male leaders. This means that for every female leader in the sector, there are 2.5 that are male. Compared to their male counterparts, female leaders are more likely to have worked exclusively in the creative and cultural sector, have high qualifications, have worked on a part-time basis and are generally younger." – [Trends business research commissioned by the Cultural Leadership Programme 2007](#)

The research cited above is significant because it highlights the link between my micro company and the bigger picture. All the women I employ flexibly are in their 40's and 50's. This is when many women (and indeed men) find themselves at the intersection of supporting elderly parents and rearing children. Here, it is important to acknowledge that women with children cannot claim the moral high ground in terms of responsibilities. Many women without children find themselves caring for their parents, or a seriously ill friend. It is also the age when many men and women take up significant leadership jobs in the cultural sector. It follows that the research highlights that where women are leaders, they are younger than those women with caring responsibilities that preclude them from taking major leadership roles. The pattern of women's leadership is that there are young women and there are much older women (late fifties and early sixties) who are running major cultural organisations.

"I'm sure the trustees picked the person they thought was the best candidate. They ran a fair process. It was the first time there were two senior women who were candidates so there is something to celebrate. But it struck me that both Helen [Boaden] and I were older, when it is traditional to give these jobs to people in their 40s — and I think there are some interesting issues for how you manage career patterns for women, particularly when they have families. You have to let them come in and out of employment and still progress. But I think the person you appoint to lead big public institutions does send a message. With appointments such as this, you are not just employing someone who is competent and a good leader, but also making a statement about what the institution is like and how you want it to change." – [Caroline Thomson on not being selected as the Director General of the BBC](#)

The problem is how we organise work. The current arrangement means that people with children, parental care responsibility, or with certain disabilities and/or chronic health conditions cannot work in the way prescribed. Most traditional positions require daily attendance in an office environment, and the concept of “flexible working” extends only to working between 10a.m and 4.00p.m. (on the condition that you answer email in the evening). Cultural jobs are advertised as either full-time or part-time, but rarely as flexible. We define “work” in terms of hours/days worked rather than tasks completed. Even in senior positions, there is in a contractual reference to hours per week and weeks per year worked. What would happen if we didn't measure jobs in terms of days worked but in

terms of tasks to be completed? What would happen if we gave people a completely free reign to deliver the tasks in a location and in a time they chose? While freelancers are accustomed to working in this way, there is little precedent of running whole organisations on this model. As a CEO, I don't need to work part-time, I need to be able to take weeks off at a time. Conversely, for short periods of time (such as when a show opens) I am willing and able to do a 70-hour week.

Workplaces with a high-trust, high-freedom ethos actually have very good results. The IT start-ups of Silicon Valley have long reaped the rewards of giving employees a long leash — it results in entrepreneurial approaches and project innovation. For a “creative” industry such as the cultural sector (involved as we are in the arts), we have very *uncreative* workplaces. Many of our organisations have high core costs because they employ a lot of people in large offices with high overheads. I would also argue that they are not recruiting the experience or talent they require, simply because many experienced people can no longer work in this way. As an employer of arts freelancers, I know that I can hire people of outstanding calibre. These people *should* be working for organisations but choose not to, because of the lack of flexibility. Most artists have a cycle of working intensively and then relaxing. Working consistently long hours to run a cultural institution is counter-productive, because a long-hours culture kills creativity — not only artistic creativity, but the creativity of thought needed to run a large organisation like a major theatre.

The arts sector has much to learn from the business sector, which has tackled this problem more directly, because it has learned that a compromised workforce that lacks experience or talent means lower economic returns. In Sussan, an Australian company, the executive chair and owner, Naomi Milgrom, is an ardent advocate of workplace flexibility, but what marks her stance out from most other leaders is her commitment to flexibility at the executive level.

"We see flexibility as a vital tool," [Milgrom told a forum at Melbourne Business School's Centre for Ethics in November 2012](#). "Flexibility is an alternative to male-oriented, traditional business practices. We recognise that long hours and inflexible work practices are major obstacles to the careers of many, many talented women, so we are doing it differently. I would even be prepared to say that addressing culture and flexible work practices are critical to addressing the paucity of women in senior roles in Australian businesses."

Perversely, flexible work arrangements are currently associated with a lack of commitment to an organisation. In speaking with the CEO of a large successful international arts festival about the return of its marketing manager after 6 months of maternity leave, I enquired whether she would be working flexibly in future. The response was: "Oh, you can't do marketing for an important set-up like this part time!" I question this logic, but don't feel that the CEO had done the same. Would not a post of 20 hours per week supported by an effective administrator/assistant achieve the same return? In many arts organisations, most senior roles (apart from the CEO) have no administrative support — which is a real efficiency problem. Employing people (on lower rates of pay) to do administration would make many leaders more innovative and effective. It is quite simply a waste of money.

Naomi Milgrom presents a strong case for return on investment from flexible work policies and a commitment to diversity within her group of companies. Milgrom promoted the CEO of Sportsgirl, Elle Roseby, to her current role a week before Roseby left on maternity leave with her first child six years ago. "I did this because in the five years I mentored and

worked with Elle, she demonstrated that she was a natural leader. I was confident in our relationship, her people skills and her passion and dedication to the business. Why would I throw that away?"

I would like to suggest a new model for arts organisations — that we employ senior roles flexibly and on higher salaries. A model of good practice could be a recent recruitment advert from the Clean Break Theatre Company:

Clean Break —Head of Development: 28 hours (negotiable) North London, salary: £45-£50k plus benefits

I propose a new and revolutionary approach: that we pay people more and ask them to work fewer hours, and in a way that suits them both in terms of geography and when/how long they work. In the arts, the current culture promotes underpaid and overworked staff, simply because we are passionate about what we do. However, the real return on this culture is a lack of workplace diversity. Poor financial rewards for risky leadership roles results in talent simply leaving the sector, or going freelance. There is a great pool of women in their 40's and 50's, working as arts consultants, who are of the calibre to run a major cultural institution. However, they won't take one of these jobs because it is location-dependent, based on a 60-hour week, and requires several evening commitments per week.

At a government level, Nick Clegg is celebrating new parental leave legislation, which would allow women could return to work two weeks after giving birth — while their partners looked after the baby. This is missing the point. The government has created legislation that enables women to “be men”. What we need is a wholesale re-imagining of the workplace for men and women alike. As a society, we are obsessed with hours and days worked. I contest that most people do excellent work during 2-4 hours of their day. From an efficiency perspective, much of the rest of their work should probably be given to someone on a lower rate of pay.

Milgrom says the imperative for companies to become more flexible is growing. "We all know what a tough business environment we are in right now. We have to adapt to survive." She identifies the following as key drivers of that need for change:

- **Scarcity of talented people, both men and women:** "We are wasting those who have massive potential. In professions such as law and science, we are witnessing a drop-off rate now of more than 50% amongst women at senior levels."
- **A change in values:** "More and more men, as well as women, are looking for a work/life balance that enables them to prosper in their work and at the same time, participate fully in their family lives. One in four men and women are now carers of children or parents, and that situation is on the increase. The reality is that of necessity we have to accommodate different needs and balance competing commitments."

The [Cultural Leadership Programme found](#) that only 75 per cent of women saw their future as senior leaders (as opposed to 100 per cent of men), and for a variety of reasons, women were opting out of senior roles and related lifestyle. On the other hand, 61 per cent of female leaders had never had a career break, and the majority of those interviewed felt that taking a break to have children was a serious issue affecting a woman's career progress.

We are an industry of creative minds. Business is changing because it recognises the rewards of a diverse workplace, yet most arts organisations mimic business environments of twenty years ago. We have the creativity to change how we work. The rewards would be many, not the least of which would be happier, more satisfied professionals. Having control over your work (when, how and what) is cited as being important in creating happiness and preventing depression and anxiety. Happy people are better innovators, communicators, and collaborators. These are challenging times in the arts, and we desperately need the most talented people who can advocate for the arts and re-imagine our financial models. In order to attract these talented people, we need to re-imagine the workplace of major cultural institutions.