

# An issue for all of society

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When Kate McKenzie took up the role of Chorus CEO earlier this year, she became the only woman to currently head an NZX50 company.

Trailblazing is nothing new for Kate, who has spent her working life in male-dominated organisations.

“When I first started work in the public sector in Australia, it really wasn’t too long after the law barring married women from working in the public service had been dropped. I went into an environment where I had to lead working parties of men, many of whom were horrified that a woman might be telling them what to do. So every so often I have to remind myself that we have come a very long way since then.”

A qualified lawyer, Kate’s initially worked in a range of public sector roles, including as a CEO in the NSW Government of the Departments of Commerce, Industrial Relations and the Workcover Authority. She moved to Telstra in 2004, where she was most recently Telstra’s Chief Operating Officer, having headed groups ranging from innovation, products and marketing to regulatory, public policy and communications.

Chorus has more men than women in senior positions and therefore pays more of its total remuneration budget to men than women, but Kate says the overall position only gives part of the picture. There are simply not enough women in senior operational roles, including IT, Infrastructure, Sales and Customer Services.

The figure is also skewed by a high number of industry veterans.

“It’s the same in many telcos like ours. Most of those who’ve worked here for up to 40 years are men because there weren’t any women in the industry when they joined. And we have a very low turnover here – about seven per cent. We have to think about how to move women coming up around so they get the breadth of experience, and become more competitive for senior roles.”

One of the keys to closing the gender pay gap is to see it as an issue for society rather than marginalising it as a women’s issue, she says.

“In order to get a productive society where people can manage their lives and their families, you need to have flexible ways of working. Men need flexibility as well – we have many men on parental leave.

“I have complete sympathy for that because I can think of different times in my career I took short periods of time off work for my two children. My husband did a much bigger share of parenting. He got lots of positive reinforcement because everyone thought it was wonderful that this bloke was taking on all the parenting responsibilities.”

“Also, there is a very active diversity and inclusion agenda here. We regularly report on progress to the board and have a plan on a page that keeps everyone grounded,” says Kate.

The company also has a well-developed leadership programme that emphasises inclusiveness.

“I think it is important that every one has a sense of belonging when they come to work – and that should go for all ages, ethnicities, cultures and gender. We have a strong sense of purpose around that.”

Kate has a theory as to why diversity is front of mind for many businesses today.

“The world is moving faster and faster, and innovation and creativity are becoming more important components of leadership. It’s not only that you need to understand what your customers are looking for, you also need to have people who can think differently about how the world is going to look in five years time and how you should be preparing for all of that. To do those things well – you need diversity.”

