

Breaking the ice

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SME flexibility could be an advantage when it comes to closing the gender pay gap, says former Icebreaker Chairman, Rob Fyfe.

The former Icebreaker and Air New Zealand CEO thinks that smaller businesses have the edge over large corporates, as they can more swiftly find solutions tailored to specific needs. This gives them more flexibility to address issues like the gender pay gap.

“I’ve always been a strong believer in workplace culture being more important than processes. When you give people freedom to act you have far better outcomes than when you require them to conform to a policy. They just need to know what the purpose is.

“It’s different in larger organisations, you could get anarchy without a framework of processes. Here, we have tried to reduce those policy frameworks to allow freedom of expression but we have very clear principles throughout the business,” says Rob.

These principles include a commitment to sustainability and high ethical standards all along the production chain from sheep station to shop floor.

Icebreaker employs over 400 staff globally, including offices in North America and Europe. Unusually, in the male-dominated world of outdoor apparel, women outnumber men at all levels of the organisation apart from senior management, where there are slightly fewer women to men (currently 13 to 16).

“It’s a distinct advantage having a high number of women working for the brand. When the company launched in the 1990s, outdoor apparel was pretty much male territory – if you look at the advertising imagery, it was quite macho. Icebreaker images have always celebrated nature, and show men and women.”

As a small company competing on the world stage, diversity is a business imperative.

“We think consciously about diversity as we have to be innovative and creative, and that means having a diverse team. We have offices in Europe and North America, and have a slightly different approach in each country.”

Rob sees the gender pay gap as a symptom of underlying issues.

“We have instinctively focused on addressing those issues, but although we regularly report on a whole bunch of business attributes, it’s only recently that we have been able to access and drill down into HR data. Having that empirical data will allow us to set targets, and tackle any unconscious bias.”

He believes that career breaks through parental leave are one of the main causes of the pay gap.

“For an organisation to be successful, you have to source the best talent. That’s one of our main drivers. We work hard to retain good people and we are willing to fit in with them. We have flexible work arrangements with many of our staff, including working part-time or remotely as the need dictates,” he says.

One of the spin-off benefits is that the company never has a problem with recruitment.

“If you invest in sensible work practices, people get to know what a company is about. We don’t use any external recruitment agency, either people approach us or it’s through word of mouth.”

Rob, who only recently stepped out of the CEO role, says the company also has a strong policy of recruiting internally. His successor, Greg Smith, was previously General Manager for Australia and New Zealand.

“As the business grows, the challenge is to retain our strong company culture, so it’s all about growing existing staff into leadership positions so we don’t lose what makes the business unique.”

