




Since the 1970's, women have increasingly participated in the European labour market. They form a qualified and highly motivated part of the workforce, and bring valuable skills to today's changing market environments. Many wish to continue working after having children, and seek real job satisfaction, career opportunities and economic self-sufficiency. Such endeavours are very much in line with the goals of the Lisbon Council<sup>1)</sup>.

Yet despite these good intentions, women are still under-utilized and under-valued in many enterprises today. The result is a waste of resources available to these organizations — the so-called “non-equality cost”.

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Social structures and the role of women have changed, but the enterprise culture has not kept pace. All too often, it remains

1) At the European Lisbon Council in 2000, 15 European heads of state and government agreed to make Europe “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world” by 2010. Among its goals are full employment (more jobs), the promotion of quality and productivity at work (better jobs), fostering cohesion and an inclusive labour market (greater social cohesion).

Web [www.lisboncouncil.net](http://www.lisboncouncil.net)



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## What about the women?

## Enhancing quality through gender equality

by Roberta Bortolucci

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primarily tuned to male needs and conditions, suited to the traditional family unit where the man works while his wife takes care of home, children and elderly parents.

The problem is that such enterprises, even if conscious of changes involving women and the workplace, have little awareness of the need to take gender differences into consideration in order to eliminate the “non-quality” factors that come from “non-equality”.

Many top managers pay little regard to the influence of gender variables on the enterprise culture, on human resource (HR) management and on organization of the workplace – nor to the negative effect this can have on quality systems. Men and women have different experiences and needs – and this greatly affects their motivation, involvement and performance. The enterprise cannot be a “neutral” place, because men and women bring their gender identity to the working environment.

### Progetto Donna – equality in quality

Progetto Donna (“Project for Women”) was established in Bologna, Italy, in 1989, as a study centre of enterprise consultants working towards equal opportunities for women. The organization promotes and coordinates “Vision 2000: Gender in Quality Standards” – the goal of which is raise awareness of the importance of gender in quality terms.

Our objective is to provide the necessary skills and tools to implement a Gender Equality System within ISO 9001:2000. To do so, we have developed training modules for HR managers on how gender awareness in management can lead to enhanced quality, and on the value of gender equality issues for quality management system (QMS) auditors.

“Vision 2000” is co-funded by the European Commission's Leonardo da Vinci Programme<sup>2)</sup> and developed by a European partnership including the Italian branch of the certification body AFAQ International, and quality system consultants and trainers Metha Sistemi, of Italy, and Entente-UK<sup>3)</sup>. The project recognizes that an enterprise environment

2) The European Commission's Leonardo da Vinci Programme serves as “a laboratory of innovation in the field of lifelong learning, providing vocational training with the aim of preparing European citizens better for entering the labour market, thereby reducing the number of unemployed”. It also recognizes the challenge facing companies that need a skilled workforce to cope with the rapid scientific and technological changes in an increasingly competitive world.

Web [www.europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/leonardo/leonardo\\_en.html](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/leonardo/leonardo_en.html)

3) Other “Vision 2000” project partners are: IEGD Diversity Management Institute, Spain; GbQ Training Centre, Germany; APID, Italy and MYCCI, Bulgaria, as SME support organizations; UIL Trade Union, Italy; Umbria Region, Public Body, Italy; and Byweb, CD Rom production, Portugal.

in which there is under-utilization of a large part of the workforce is in fact a non-quality environment that needs to be rectified.

Equal opportunity in a QMS means providing tools to help managers and staff overcome gender discrimination by:

- recognizing the different needs and motivations of men and women, and by so doing encourage the highest quality of work from both;
- being aware of gender stereotypes that hinder full recognition of the value of women in the workplace. This discrimination can start with the selection process and continue throughout professional life, and by
- taking full advantage of gender difference by recognizing the creativity that comes from diversity.

### The virtuous circle

Of course many women do devote time to raising children, but the provision of well planned support is ultimately an advantage for the enterprise. It can yield more benefits than costs by retaining, motivating and involving valuable female employees – thus saving the cost of hiring and training replacements.

Expressed simply, implementation of equal opportunity



practices means to set in motion a “virtuous circle” that offers advantages to women and enterprises. Among the many outstanding advantages reported by equal opportunity employers are:

- higher staff retention, lower turnover, less absenteeism and greater levels of satisfaction;
- greater success in attracting talented young women devoted to their jobs and careers;
- a positive change in the enterprise culture – in leadership profiles, in career models and in awareness of gender differences;
- improved teamwork among men and women leading to enhanced competitiveness and creativity, and a less conflictual environment;
- better perception of women’s skills, greater understanding of gender differences and their impact on the organization, and
- improved public image.

### Equality must be integrated into the organization’s strategic quality processes and quality procedures

importance for HR management of placing greater emphasis on worker involvement, motivation, commitment and professional development. In this context, equality is neither an external nor a marginal issue in the enterprise culture. Instead, it must be integrated into the organization’s strategic quality processes and quality procedures.

The innovative Vision 2000 project has highlighted the