

Lifecycle



● Kate O'Reilly decided to create a women-only recruitment agency and gender consultancy knowing full well what she was up against. "The audience is male and feminism is still a dirty word," says the former Deloitte corporate finance director.

Her company, Optimiss Consulting, concentrates on getting women into senior jobs in her old stamping ground of the big four accounting firms and big four banks, although mining companies are increasingly asking for O'Reilly's services, too.

"The interesting thing is mining and resources companies are far more open to this sort of thing than financial services," she says. "The gender equality stats across financial services are really poor – no companies have more than 20 per cent women in the management team."

O'Reilly started her business last September, which was

good timing given the Australian Securities Exchange gender-based corporate governance guidelines were published at the end of last year. The guidelines ask companies to detail in their annual reports the number of women on their boards and in senior management positions.

O'Reilly says the nature of conversations with prospective clients changed immediately from the time the ASX made the announcement.

"In September, I was having discussions with the head of human resources in an organisation; now, the boards are pushing down on the chief executives so much so that I'm talking directly to the chief executives," she says.

"There's a deeply entrenched resistance

... the ASX initiative is driving the volume of work for me but the unfortunate thing is [companies are] doing it because they have to. Corporates have to be seen to be doing the right thing."

To boost the services the company offers, O'Reilly has set up an advisory panel that can offer free business guidance and includes high-profile feminist Eva Cox. O'Reilly says that Cox is one of the "most commercially astute women I've ever met".

She says that while she has witnessed many incidents of harassment and "unsavoury behaviours" towards women, she found herself most exposed to it in corporate finance.

"You'd expect to see discrimination against women more in the offshore oil industry," she says. "It's all about changing behaviour and we need to engage with the men to change the culture and behaviour because only then will you change the bias." **BRW**



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Interviewer: Judith Tydd

Kate O'Reilly

Optimiss Consulting

Position	Director
Milestones	September 2009: Optimiss opens
	December 2009: ASX announces gender targets initiative for listed entities, sparking huge uptake in demand
	December 2010: Objective is to have employed five full-time staff