

Gender diversity in action at AON: Understanding the gap



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Supporting work–life balance and addressing the underrepresentation of women in the labour market: approaches and good practices in ICT sector

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AON is a multinational professional services company that provides a broad range of risk, retirement and health solutions. The AON Centre for Innovation and Analytics plays a core technological role in enabling this work. The company's ethos is firmly evidence-driven, and the nature of its business is to provide lasting solutions rather than attractive policy headlines. AON's policy on gender is part of a wider aim of creating an inclusive workplace.

AON's white paper, *The Gender Gap: Why Men and Women Experience Work Differently* is a research-based examination that aims to go to the very root of gender gaps in the workplace and beyond. It provides advice for eliminating career trajectory–related inequality in expectations, experiences and outcomes among women and men.

Information about Ireland — policy in context

Despite Ireland's robust legislation on gender equality, women remain the default carers in Irish society: family care work is unequally shared between women (70%) and men (30%). Of 27 countries in a global study on unpaid family and household work, Irish households spent the most time each day (29%) on care for household members. Related to the historical role of women in Irish society, the lack of affordable, accessible, high-quality childcare is likely to be a central factor behind these data. Similarly, the absence of high-quality state-provided residential care facilities for elderly people means that female family members continue to experience a cultural and moral imperative to take on these onerous responsibilities.

Gender inequality and employment

Based on 2016 data, Irish women aged 25–34 (55.1%) are more likely to have a third-level qualification than men (42.9%) in this age group. Nonetheless, stereotypical areas of employment prevail, with women continuing to be overrepresented in the arts, humanities, social sciences and caring professions. Figures from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2017) show that 79.3% of graduates in ICT were male.

While women's qualifications are excelling nationwide, CSO figures show that the gender pay gap in Ireland continues to widen. In 2014, the difference between men and women's pay was 12%; by 2016, it had risen to 14%. This discrepancy translates into lifelong economic inequalities in Ireland's gender-based pension gap, which stands at 37%. Ireland has the fifth highest pension gap in the EU, where the average is 38%. Gender-stereotyped areas of work are significant both in general and in specific contexts, such as during the economic crisis, when reductions in pay and pensions for public-sector healthcare and education professionals disproportionately impacted on women, who are the majority of employees in those sectors (81 and 76%, respectively).

There is no framework in Ireland for flexibility in working arrangements, although research has shown such arrangements to be more prevalent in the public than the private sector. Part-time work, job-sharing, flexitime and other variations on flexible working are all at the discretion of individual employers and must be negotiated within the boundaries of the statutory legislation and in the context of each particular workplace.

The Irish tech industry

Women's underrepresentation in high-tech positions reflects persistent gender bias throughout the educational sectors related to science, maths and technology. While there is no evidence of gender-based differences in ability, durable and self-perpetuating gender-based performance gaps in these areas translate into increased confidence among boys compared with girls. High levels of educational attainment by girls and women do not translate into relative parity in terms of employment and earnings. Women tend to have interrupted careers and to assume disproportionately more of the challenges of reconciling work and family life. This is apparently incompatible with the tech industry's particular demands and its 'bro culture'. Achieving gender balance in tech companies must, therefore, be associated with greater gender equality and the pursuit of work–life balance, as reflected in flexible working conditions for everyone and fewer gender-based expectations on the part of employers.

Introducing work–life balance measures: good practice

AON's Centre for Innovation and Analytics

Established in 1987, AON currently employs 50,000 people across 120 countries. Of the 650 Irish-based employees, 120 work at the company's Centre for Innovation and Analytics (ACIA) in Dublin. Since its inception in 2009, the ACIA provides a global data repository that makes actionable analytics available for diverse businesses worldwide.

Aon is the Irish word for 'one' and is used by AON to articulate the inclusivity and diversity at the core of its value system:

- AON sponsors the Irish Women's Rugby team, reflecting its strong belief in women's strength and leadership.
- The company has an equal opportunities and affirmative-action policy regarding women and other underrepresented groups, and is committed to equality in practice as well as in name.
- By promoting and offering flexible working arrangements where possible, AON ensures that women know their company's policy on inclusivity. So working parents – mostly women – feel able to request the flexible arrangements that can facilitate optimum work–life balance without fear of censure.

To firmly embed its inclusion ethos throughout the business, AON Ireland began to develop a Diversity Council in 2017. This is not an instantaneous development - Council members are champions of particular inclusion issues with a real passion for change. AON's inclusion strategy clearly articulates the business incentives behind fostering a climate of diversity in the workplace: 'Our approach to inclusion harnesses the power to embed and integrate diversity and inclusion concepts and content into all areas of the firm, which will ultimately drive innovation, create opportunities and serve our clients internally and externally.'

At the core of its inclusion strategy lies what AON calls its 'unmatched talent' agenda, which aims to make AON the best place to work in the industry. The three pillars of the strategy are cross-cultural competence, workforce diversity (including gender) and an inclusive culture.

The driving force behind efforts to make the strategy work was the creation of business resource groups (BRGs), which bring together colleagues with a common identity 'to empower results for our talent and in the marketplace'. Of the 11 registered BRGs, one prioritises women and another the issues affecting working parents. In October 2017, AON launched the Parents and Carers Network as a first colleague Diversity Group.

AON's 2017 white paper, *The Gender Gap: Why Men and Women Experience Work Differently* is based on data gathered in an engagement survey among nearly 400,000 employees across more than 60 industries. It revealed the deep-seated gender inequalities that perpetuate women's reduced professional engagement and render their work experience less than optimum. As well as reproducing cultural inequalities, the business consequences of such reduced engagement include reduced productivity, weakened business outcomes and poor rates of staff retention. It is pointless for tech companies to recruit more women only to lose them through the negative impact of gender discrimination in workplace practices.

The AON study found that, in practice, women at all levels of organisations did not trust companies to ensure gender-balanced fair treatment. Female professionals reported feeling less influential and less empowered than their male colleagues, and were constantly aware of the lower remuneration they received for doing the same work as men.

The gender breakdown of personnel in the ACIA is 43% female to 57% male, more than double the usual spread throughout the technology sector. The Gender Gap research revealed that companies that had at least 30% of executive positions filled by women typically had higher profits than those that did not. The ACIA is approaching this target with women now occupying 25% of executive leadership positions and accounting for 24% of the line manager population.

AON established the Women's International Network (WIN) to promote personal and professional growth, support career advancement within the company, and benefit clients through knowledge sharing. A Business Resource Group aims to help AON remain a destination of choice for high-quality professionals by enhancing its ability to attract, develop and retain talented women.

The objectives of WIN are to provide a global community for women in the tech industry seeking mentorship, professional and personal growth, workplace flexibility, and visibility. As such, the network both encourages women in the industry and makes business-driven arguments for gender equality.

WIN's stated purpose is to:

- Promote the progress of women through all career phases
- Promote sustainable and innovative professional career paths
- Encourage other companies to recognise the need for diverse management approaches
- Raise the visibility of women in business
- Profit from making AON a destination of choice among highly talented women globally
- Serve as a source of female opinion toward new products and services
- Leverage best practices across the network
- Shape the future for the next generation of women at AON and across the industry.

In their advice and mentoring activities with diverse companies, AON propose the view that equality is not about a single work–life balance initiative. Rather, what is needed is a comprehensive understanding of the underlying issues, and progressive steps to radically change a culture that harbours elements of gender inequality.

Quotes from the employees

'We work in an extremely positive environment where everyone has a voice. It is hugely respectful and we are gender and culturally diverse.'

'It's a very flexible and supportive place to work, and that's really great to know for me as a working mum.'

'I am really proud that we are so far ahead in gender diversity and that we go equal at ACIA.'

Contacts/Further Information

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Further information

[At the Aon Centre, diversity isn't just a buzzword](#)



[How do top companies attract top talent?](#)



More good practices

[EIGE's collection of good practices](#)



[EIGE's approach to good practices](#)



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TOOL: Work-life balance in ICT