



## Taking on the old boys' club

**Sarah Sierszyn**, former FCSI membership services coordinator, ponders the reality of working as a female consultant

**W**hat do you think of when you hear the phrase old boys' club? Perhaps you see a group of men in white shirts and skinny ties, standing around a desk smoking cigars; their female secretary, her hair in a perfect bouffant, in the corner taking notes. In other words, a scene straight out of hit TV drama *Mad Men*, set in the 1960s.

But what does old boys' club really mean? Socially, it's defined as male

discrimination against women – a group of typically older, white men who refuse to speak to, deal with or work with women.

In the business world, generally, it refers to a company that is male dominated with little or no chance of advancement for female employees.

In recent years, some companies have received public scrutiny to change their old boys' club mentality. It is the 21st century after all. The US Civil Rights Act, passed in

1964, prohibits employment discrimination based on race, colour, religion, nationality and gender.

There's no doubt, large strides have been made in the last few decades to increase gender diversity in the workplace. Between 1984 and 2009, the number of working women in America increased from 44 million to 72 million. So why does the old boys' club keep popping up as an issue? According to the 2011 US Census Bureau, >

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nationally, there are 7% more men in the labour force than women. That may not sound too bad, but in terms of US population it is still a gap of 21,811,434 people (roughly the population of Texas).

In some industries, gender diversity in the work place is still a challenge to be overcome. The formation of societies such as The Foodservice Council for Women and Women Foodservice Forum imply that a gender imbalance is an issue in the foodservice industry. In Foodservice Consultants Society International (FCSI), female membership makes up 16% of the active membership internationally. This figure seems to suggest that portions of the foodservice industry still cling to the old boys' club culture.

### Work hard

Joyce Fasano FCSI, vice president of Brailsford & Dunlavey (B&D), has never considered her gender to be a factor in her career. "It is up to the individual, regardless of their gender, to succeed or fail... Decide if you want to own your failure or own your success and act accordingly," she says.

Fasano's mentor Hilda Watson Gifford was the first woman to graduate from the Cornell Hotel School. She went on to win the Howard B Meek award back in 1972, and eventually completed a long and successful career. "The most important piece of advice she ever gave me was, 'If you want something and are passionate about getting it, go right to the top and ask for it,'" says Fasano.

Amy Hegarty FCSI, a principal consultant with Foodservice Consultants Studio in Virginia, says: "While I believe the foodservice industry used to be a boys' club, it is definitely changing. There are many women at the conferences I attend and in leadership and award-winning roles throughout the industry."



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Fasano and Hegarty have both worked hard to take their careers to the next level. Each serves on committees in the FCSI. Fasano currently serves on FCSI's Council of Professional Standards, a body that exists to establish the Society's standards for professional competency. Hegarty is chair of FCSI's Inspiring Consultants through Opportunity and Networking committee (ICON), formed to nurture newer members of the organisation.

"There are still some people from the older generation that tend to focus on the men in a group rather than the women" says Hegarty. "But I don't know if it's really because I am a woman or it's just my experience in general.

"It may just be that these people are focusing on those they know better, who happen to be older and male, rather than the younger woman in the group."

So, what does the future gender landscape look like for the foodservice industry? "As we work throughout the industry to attract younger

consultants and members of our professional organisations," says Hegarty, "I think we will automatically attract more women. Our challenge is to make it known that this field exists, not only to females but to young males too."

### Know your field

Paraphrasing the words of JFK, Fasano advises, "Ask not what the industry can do for you but what you can do for the industry. Know your field, continue to learn and do your job to the absolute best of your ability. Succeed at that and your gender won't matter."

In a 2010 *QSR* magazine interview about gender diversity, Women's Foodservice Forum President Fritzi Woods, said: "People leading the companies in this industry share one big concern. We talk about sustainability, the economy, but at the end of the day we must have the right people to drive our businesses. So it's more a question of recruiting and retaining the right talent."

So where does that leave the state of the old boys' club? Yes, the gender gap exists. Our society is working hard to close that gap, but is that the only answer to this societal issue?

With the popularity of social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and others, the landscape of networking has changed. The culture of wining and dining, power lunches, and face-to-face meetings is being replaced. We now measure the success of a company or person by the number of fans on a Facebook fanpage, the popularity of a Twitter feed, the number of followers on Pinterest, the attractiveness of a website and other online platforms.

Perhaps adapting to a technology and device-driven society is the real challenge that will see the end of the old boys' club. ■

