

Association of Accounting Technician's response to the Women & Work APPG consultation on Women & the Industrial Strategy

Introduction

The Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT) has approximately 140,000 members. In 2016, 69% of AAT members were women. This compares extremely well with other accountancy bodies such as ICAEW (28%) ICAS (33%) CIMA (35%) ACCA (46%) and CIPFA (32%).

AAT published its gender pay gap data as part of its annual report long before it was legally required to do so, was the first and remains the only accountancy body to have signed the Women in Finance Charter and has regularly engaged with policymakers on issues relating to Gender Equality.

The starting point for this review is an assumption that the Industrial Strategy does not sufficiently cater for women given it makes no specific reference to gender issues. AAT is not convinced that this is necessarily the case given the nature of much that is contained in the strategy will be of benefit to all – men and women - and in many areas having a gender focus is simply not necessary. It is also worth noting that numerous Government departments headed by women were involved in the formulation of the strategy; that the Industrial Strategy team at BEIS is led by a woman and that almost 50% of her 40-strong team is female, it therefore seems highly unlikely that issues of concern to women will not have been appropriately considered even if not specifically referenced.

What policies should the industrial strategy contain to enable businesses to attract and retain women in sectors where they are currently under-represented (e.g. STEM sectors, finance and construction)? More women are working in core STEM areas than ever before, with over [61,000 more women](#) in STEM this year than last (compared to a 45,000 drop for men). Women now total a quarter of STEM employees.

Many businesses are already doing a great deal to attract and retain women to undertake STEM roles. It is clearly in their own business interests to do so. BP runs women-only recruitment days to attract female engineers. British Gas has long sought to attract more women to undertake engineering roles and utilises existing female engineers for case studies, advertising and educational engagement programmes. Over the past three years the accountancy sector has considerably increased its focus on a failure to attract and retain women, with KPMG, PwC, EY and Deloitte all now offering returnship programmes.

In addition to industry, Government clearly has a role to play here. The Government Careers Strategy, referenced in the Industrial Strategy Green Paper, will be key to the encouragement of greater uptake of STEM and finance roles. By highlighting the various routes to high paying employment in the finance, accountancy and STEM sectors and the myriad opportunities available to women with the likes of BP and British Gas, the big four accountancy firms as well as thousands of SMEs, more young people will be encouraged to pursue such careers.

1) The Careers Strategy should require schools and colleges to proactively make female students aware of accountancy, finance and STEM opportunities available to them and to utilise pay data to raise awareness and understanding of the financial premium that comes with many of these jobs

Does the Government need more specific workplace policies for people with disabilities, specifically women with disabilities, as part of the industrial strategy, and what should these policies contain?

Although the level of employment among disabled people has been rising more quickly than for non-disabled people in recent years, the 2016 Labour Force Survey shows that disabled people are still more than twice as likely to be unemployed as non-disabled people.

The shortfall is hugely damaging to the individuals concerned whether male or female, businesses in general and to the British economy. Disability charity Scope suggests that a 10% rise in the employment rate among disabled adults would contribute an extra £12bn to the Exchequer by 2030.

Problems range from poor careers advice, a lack of support for disabled apprentices, and short-sighted employers who fail to recognise that improvements for disabled workers often improve the working environment for all.

Many employers do recognise the enormous contribution that disabled people can make to their organisations, and are taking steps to do more. The accountancy sector isn't perfect, but it has made a good start on tackling disability issues. KPMG is a founding partner of the City Mental Health Alliance; whose corporate members also include Deloitte and PwC. The alliance aims to create a culture of good mental health for workers, share best practice and increase understanding about mental health. This should be looked at more closely by policymakers to assess if it could be replicated in other industries.

- 1) Publish a careers strategy that specifies requirements around careers advice for the disabled (and specifically disabled girls) as well as requiring information advice and guidance to be provided on STEM subjects to all girls
- 2) Incorporate a specific female and specific disability targets within the Government's 3 million apprenticeship starts target
- 3) The Office of Disability Issues should look at the City Mental Health Alliance and other examples of best practice to establish what lessons can be learned for nationwide programmes

How can the industrial strategy make the most of the opportunities presented by new ways of working (such as 'gig' work) whilst ensuring existing gendered challenges of the labour market are not replicated?

Gig work is particularly attractive to women given its inherently flexible nature. It therefore comes as little surprise that The Association of Independent Professionals and the Self-employed (IPSE) recently stated self-employed women form the majority of the newly self-employed.

It is true that many women work in gig enabled care sector roles which are traditionally low paid and often undervalued. However, there is no evidence to suggest that this is any more so than in the traditional sense. In other words, this is not a result of gig working, it doesn't matter if they are undertaken in the traditional sense or in new technology enabled ways, the work remains the same. Imposing additional restrictions or requirements on the Gig Economy is therefore unnecessary. Instead a focus on driving up pay and value through routes that will benefit all should be made e.g. local authorities need to raise prices, the money from the social care precept on council tax bills needs to be effectively invested and the sector needs to campaign far more effectively for a long-term funding settlement.

It's also important to acknowledge that low paid care sector workers or Deliveroo workers do not form the majority of women in the gig economy. Instead gig workers are primarily providing professional, creative or administrative services and are highly skilled – 44% have university degrees. Furthermore, Gig work is usually an additional income stream, not the individual's primary employment. According to IPSE this is the case for two thirds of women working in this way.

These factors need to be carefully considered before seeking to impose policy interventions that may have unintended consequences. In many areas, the gig economy is proving a welcome opportunity for women to return to work and build a successful and rewarding career. This should be welcomed rather than thwarted.

- 1) Concerns about gender issues in particular sectors of the economy should be addressed with all in mind, not simply by imposing restrictions on those working in the gig economy

How can the industrial strategy incorporate education policies that may help to deliver gender balance in the economy, such as the development of digital skills and preparing young people for self-employment?

Academic and technical education must receive equal treatment as must male and female students. Given the long-term emphasis on academic education at the expense of technical – not only do all students gravitate towards an academic route to their career of choice, this is even more marked amongst women. Effective information and support should be available for everyone, regardless of their education and training choices and regardless of their gender

Government is missing the point by suggesting technical education needs a "similar platform to UCAS." This repeats the well-intentioned but misguided recommendations of both Teach First and The Social Mobility Commission who in 2016 both suggested the same.

Instead of something similar, it must be the same. The UCAS web site should be merged with the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) and other non-academic websites so that all young people, male and female, visit a single source of information - an integrated portal that ensures equal coverage of all routes to employment - helping students to make more informed decisions, more easily compare technical and higher education courses whilst at the same time helping to present both as equally valid options to males and females.

Looking specifically at digital skills, the Government has already acknowledged that for the UK to be a world leading digital economy that works for everyone, it is crucial that everyone has the digital skills they need to fully participate in society.

Women are underrepresented in both the uptake of digital qualifications and in digital roles with just 17% of people who work in the tech sector and only 10% of students taking computer science at A level being female.

There are a range of steps being taken by industry to combat this problem e.g. [Future Tech Girls](#) and Facebook's [She Means Business](#) programme but more could be done by Government to disseminate information about available programmes and again an emphasis on this area in the forthcoming Careers Strategy would be helpful.

More importantly, given all jobs in the future are likely to require some form of basic digital skills understanding, a requirement for all students - irrespective of gender - to have basic digital skills at GCSE grade 4 (grade C) or above in the same way that most employers currently require for GCSE Maths and English, would be a welcome statement of Government intent and of ensuring young people, parents and employers appreciate the rapidly increasing importance of digital skills.

- 1) The UCAS web site should be merged with the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) and other non-academic websites so that all young people, male and female, visit a single source of information
- 2) The forthcoming Government Careers Strategy must make specific provision for digital skills
- 3) Government must do more to disseminate examples of best practice
- 4) Basic digital skills at GCSE grade 4 (grade C) and above should become the norm as with Maths and English

About AAT

AAT is a professional accountancy body with approximately 50,000 full and fellow members and over 90,000 student and affiliate members worldwide. Of the full and fellow members, there are more than 4,250 licensed accountants who provide accountancy and taxation services to over 400,000 British businesses.

AAT is a registered charity whose objectives are to advance public education and promote the study of the practice, theory and techniques of accountancy and the prevention of crime and promotion of the sound administration of the law.

Further information

If you have any queries, require any further information or would like to discuss any of the above points in more detail, please contact Phil Hall, AAT Head of Public Affairs & Public Policy, at:

E-mail: phil.hall@aat.org.uk

Telephone: 07392 310264

Twitter: @PhilHallAAT

Association of Accounting Technicians, 140 Aldersgate Street, London, EC1A 4HY

