

Hunting with Lyons

Arthur J Gallagher's chief operating officer wants to help more women sit atop the management food chain

By Leo D'Angelo Fisher

IT'S DIFFICULT TO RECONCILE the heft of Sarah Lyons' 20-year career resume with the perception that the "blokey" insurance industry has little to offer talented and ambitious women.

There's no denying the Chief Operating Officer of Arthur J Gallagher has enjoyed a distinguished career in Britain and more recently in Australia, but a bush statistician might say she's just the exception that proves the rule.

Ms Lyons doesn't mind attracting attention as a successful woman in insurance. She knows the industry has had a problem with women – and she intends to do something about it... in between overseeing Gallagher's 30 branches and 800 employees nationwide, that is.

"Historically, the insurance industry has not been seen as an attractive one for females," she says.

"The perspective of women would be that it's not an industry for women to be successful in. Fortunately, I've seen changes in the past 10 years. We are seeing more women becoming successful in the insurance industry."

She particularly likes what she has seen since being headhunted from the UK to take up a role as head of commercial broking at OAMPS Insurance Brokers in Melbourne early last year.

"The insurance industry in Australia is more enlightened than the UK.

"As well as more senior female executives – [Executive General Manager of Broker Business] Donna Walker at CGU comes to mind – there are several broking firms whose owners are women."

But if that sounds like a declaration of "job done" when it comes to gender equality at the top, think again.

Ms Lyons wants to see more women in management, all the way up to the C-suite and the boardroom.

Despite being a relative newcomer to Australia, she is already an in-demand speaker at women-in-insurance networking events.

She was recently part of an insurance industry networking breakfast "to connect the next generation of female leaders".

Ms Lyons was joined by CGU's Ms Walker, Honan Insurance Group National Financial Lines Director Jacqueline Romero and BJS Insurance Brokers director Belinda Scott.

"I'm happy to share my own experiences with other females in the industry, to use me as an example of how females can succeed in this sector," she says. "It would be remiss of me not to share those experiences.

"If you're a good leader, one of the things you do, which I see as fundamental to the role, is to inspire others. I think insurance is one of the best jobs you can be in, but outside of the industry it's not seen as exciting, so I'm more than happy to be out there as an example to other women."

Ms Lyons was chief financial officer and central operations officer for broker UK Global Risk Solutions when she was lured to Australia.

Before that she was group managing director of Giles Insurance Brokers, head of risk management at banking and insurance group HBOS and business development director at Halifax Insurance Ireland.

In 2011, while at Giles, Ms Lyons was inducted into the London-based Cambridge Who's Who networking group as a VIP member.

This "special distinction" recognises "exceptional commitment to achieving personal and professional success". Ms Lyons, who was cited for her "expertise in leadership, problem-solving and rela-



tionship management", attributes her career accomplishments to her "passion for the insurance industry".

So what stirs that passion?

Ms Lyons is second-generation insurance, but she admits it began as just a job.

"Like a lot of people, I fell into insurance. I lived in the Lake District [of England], where the main employer was Provincial Insurance, now part of Axa, and my options were limited.

"My dad was in insurance, he ran broker sales for Provincial, so that's where I started my career, as a claims handler."

And like a lot of people who "fall into" insurance, Ms Lyons has never looked back.

"I'm someone who likes variety and likes a challenge, and I've been



Loving the variety
insurance provides:
Arthur J Gallagher's Sarah Lyons

extremely fortunate to have had such a variety of roles. The variety has been immense.

"I've had roles in change management, e-commerce, product development, risk management, strategy... in my career I've never been pigeon-holed into a certain role that would be suitable for a female. It's always been about the skills I bring to that position.

"My skills are portable to any other sector, but when there are so many opportunities to do different things [in insurance], why would I want to go anywhere else?"

Ms Lyons had never thought about working overseas until she was approached by headhunters conducting a global search for OAMPS.

In the end, she says, it came down

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to "not the job title but the breadth of the role".

The position at OAMPS came with many possibilities. For some industry pundits in Australia, the appointment of an overseas executive with such an extensive background in growing broker businesses signalled that OAMPS was on the acquisition trail.

"Some people aspire to work in the [United] States or overseas, but I was quite happy to remain in the UK. I had

never thought about working overseas and I never thought I'd ever work in Australia.

"For me it was more about the role. OAMPS at the time was owned by Wesfarmers, but that didn't mean anything to me. I came for the role."

The job provided almost immediate variety – provided by a change of owner. OAMPS was indeed on the acquisition trail, but it wasn't doing the buying.

In April last year Gallagher announced the \$1.1 billion takeover of Wesfarmers' broking businesses: OAMPS, including OAMPS UK, and Crombie Lockwood in New Zealand.

The deal was completed that June and by last August – with OAMPS to be rebranded Arthur J Gallagher by year's end – Ms Lyons was appointed Chief Operating Officer.

The role has been a perfect fit.

"My job has tremendous variety. Every day is different, every day is exciting. No one day is ever the same."

Asked if her position makes her heir apparent to Chief Executive Andrew Godden, Ms Lyons says "it's not a traditional COO role in that sense".

Her job provides all the variety she has come to expect from her career, including responsibility for profit performance in a 30-strong commercial insurance and personal lines branch network, product development, partnerships and change management.

"I've got a great level of responsibility and I have the opportunity to shape Arthur J Gallagher in Australia and to shape commercial broking in Australia," she says.

"What I really want is to have the most admired commercial broking team in Australia, and by that I mean in terms of financial results, culture and the quality of people."

Ms Lyons says a core part of her job is to identify and nurture rising talent.

"If I spot talent outside of our own company and I think, 'I'd love that person to come and work with us,' then my job is to convince them that [Arthur J Gallagher] is a great place to be," she says.

She also has an eye on other industries.

"It depends on what the role is,

"It's about the right fit, the right people for the right roles. I believe you can teach people skills, but you can't teach them attitude."

of course, but do all our [branch] managers come from a broking background? No. The bulk of them do, yes, but I've also got managers who have come from banking and pharmaceuticals.

"In some of the smaller branches I've appointed people who haven't had leadership experience, but I can see that they have the capability to take on the challenges they will face.

"It's about the right fit, the right people for the right roles. The big thing for me is cultural. I believe you can teach people skills, but you can't teach them attitude."

Ms Lyons says in recent years the insurance industry has attracted more people from other industries – in part reflecting a talent shortage – which she believes has "made it more attractive".

She wishes her beloved industry could be better at spreading the word about what it offers, not just for women but also graduates and young candidates from other disciplines "irrespective of gender".

"The insurance industry can learn from other industries when it comes to attracting the best talent. I know I could learn from other industries about how to attract talent into insurance broking.

"This industry is not good at promoting itself. It's not good at talking to school-leavers or graduates at universi-

ties about what working in the insurance industry looks like.

"In the US, the industry is doing a lot more, but in the UK and Australia we have to get better at explaining and promoting our industry.

"We have to let younger people know about opportunities in the insurance industry, we have to let women know they can have an exciting career in insurance.

"We have to be able to compete for the best talent. When we can do that, perceptions of the industry will change."

In the meantime, Ms Lyons hopes her success – and her passion for the industry – rubs off on others.

"This business [Arthur J Gallagher] is always growing, and it will get bigger. If being a role model attracts more women to insurance, and encourages more women to plan careers in the industry, I am in a position to be that role model."

As for her own career, Ms Lyons is focused on her current role.

"I've got a lot I want to achieve in this role. I love Australia, I think it's a tremendous country, and I love Melbourne.

"From a work perspective, I see no reason to be back in the UK – and I'm not just saying that because of the weather." □