

Taking risks, working hard are the keys to success

Investment Executive

2008

As more and more women pursue careers in the financial services industry, Investment Executive asked a handful of successful women how they stuck it out in such a tough industry. Their advice? Take risks, work hard and forget about ever achieving a work/life balance. "Women often ask me if it's possible to have it all," says Tamara Vrooman, CEO of Vancouver City Savings Credit Union, who has a four-year-old son at home. "I tell them it's a struggle." Vrooman took over the helm at the credit union this past September, after spending years climbing the ranks of the British Columbia government. "On some days, I get it right," she says. "On others, I think, 'I really should have left work a little earlier today.'" Rhonda Sherwood, an investment advisor with ScotiaMcLeod Inc. in Vancouver, is similarly frank about the sacrifices a woman must make when starting out in her channel of the business. "If personal life and family is more important to you, especially in the next five years, then this isn't the direction for you," says Sherwood, who doesn't have children. "Achieving harmony in the office and at home is highly unlikely." Linda Knight and Sue Dabarno have also found balance to be a myth. "There are only 24 hours in a day, so there has to be some trade-offs," says Knight, president and chief operating officer of BMO Mutual Funds in Toronto. She, too, has a four-year-old son. Adds Dabarno, president and CEO of Winnipeg-based Richardson Partners Financial Ltd. : "There definitely may be sacrifices you need to make at home, and you often can't judge what the ramifications will be for many years to come." Dabarno has raised two daughters - taking only three weeks of maternity leave after each was born - while climbing the ranks at Canada Trust, Midland Walwyn Capital Inc. and Merrill Lynch Canada Inc. before landing at Richardson Partners. "Sometimes, people will say, 'Well, I didn't get there because I am a woman.' But perhaps they didn't make enough sacrifices," she says. "And you have to, because that's how business works." As IE's research shows, the investment dealer segment of the financial services industry remains the toughest area of the business for women to break into. (See page 42). At the brokerage firms that provided numbers to IE, 25% or less of employees were female; in comparison, many banks and planning firms reported that women comprised half - or even more than half - of their total workforce. But despite the sacrifices Dabarno has made to rise to the top of the brokerage business, she sees a wealth of opportunities - and increasingly fewer obstacles - facing women in financial services. "There are no barriers to entering the industry except those in your mind," says Dabarno, who was originally a teacher before accepting a summer job as a teller at what was then known as Canada Permanent Trust. (It was eventually acquired by Canada Trust.) In her 23 years with that company, Dabarno became its first female assistant vice president, vice president and senior vice president. "In those days, women had good opportunities to learn and train and be educated in financial services," she says, "just as they do today." Knight also took advantage of the many opportunities available to her upon joining BMO Mutual Funds as a senior product manager in 1996. "I just kept on putting up my hand and taking on more and more," she says. "If there's a really difficult project, volunteer for it. You really have to take risks and push yourself beyond what you're comfortable with." Seven years ago, Sherwood - who started her career as a teller at Montreal Trust Co., which was acquired

by Bank of Nova Scotia - took the biggest risk of her career when she decided to move to the bank's brokerage arm after spending years in investment management. "For the first few years, I lived in constant terror because I didn't have a guaranteed paycheque," she says. "How was I going to survive financially, especially since I was single?" But Sherwood found that her fears of risk and failure had a payoff: "I think being a woman and being so fearful drove me to work harder than the average man, who may tolerate risk a bit more." Sherwood also believes her gender is an advantage when it comes to attracting an increasingly lucrative demographic: women. Dabarno agrees. There's no time like the present to tap the female cohort, she says: "If you look at the statistics, there is a lot of wealth being created by women. It's a market into which female advisors might be able to make inroads." Sherwood brands herself as a "woman-focused financial planner," networking extensively among women and running educational sessions directed toward female investors. She also writes a regular newsletter entitled Hermony: Financial advice for the everyday woman. "Helping women is my passion," Sherwood says, noting that she employs an entirely different mode of selling when speaking to female prospects. "I change everything about the way I present myself." But while Sherwood has conquered the brokerage business, she admits that having kids would pose a challenge. While women employed in banking and other non-advisory roles may be able to take advantage of benefits such as flex-time, job-sharing and maternity leave - Knight, for one, took eight and a half months off when she had her son, and says it had "absolutely no impact" on her career - these options often aren't feasible for female advisors. "Maternity leave," Sherwood says, "is basically the death of your business." Dabarno agrees that female brokers have it tough, but thinks that technology and a team-based approach can help. "Women have been enabled to some extent because of remote access," she says. "And if I were starting into the business, I would be very interested in working as part of a team." Dabarno also advises seeking out a firm that has women on its board of directors and as part of its senior management team, something that Vrooman and Knight also attest to. "If there are none," Dabarno says, "the firm probably hasn't focused on the things that are important to women." But aside from the challenges inherent in starting a family while building a book of business - "There's not much the brokerage arm of the business can really do to accommodate the needs of female employees," Sherwood concedes - there's seemingly little else to prevent women from succeeding in financial services. "I've never experienced any obstacles related to being female in my 20 years of banking," she adds. Knight also speaks of a similar lack of barriers: "I've never felt that being a woman was a disadvantage." However, Sherwood, who's 37 years old, knows this wasn't always the case: "When I talk to women in their 50s and they tell me of their experiences entering the financial world, it seemed to be pretty much an old boys' club." "Of course, it was an old boys' club, but that club didn't let some guys in, either," says Dabarno, who refuses to dwell on any obstacles she may have faced in her early days. "If you talked to me at various points in my career, I'm sure I would have said it is difficult being a woman, but I don't like to tell the horror stories," noting that a lot of barriers have since been broken. Nevertheless, Vrooman believes a glass ceiling remains when it comes to women in senior management roles. "There was an assumption that this was going to be gone by now, but it's not," she says. "But it's present in other industries as well." Indeed, only 31 women currently hold top ranks in Canada's 100 largest publicly traded companies (and only three are CEOs). This is down

from 37 in 2007, according to a report from Toronto-based executive search firm Rosenzweig & Co. Vrooman suggests that sharing female-friendly practices across the industry and making women in senior roles more visible as mentors are two ways to shatter whatever glass ceiling remains. "We could learn a lot from talking to one another about what works and what doesn't," Vrooman says. "We also need to show other women that it's possible to reach a senior level and be comfortable and perform well there." Two measures that Vrooman hopes will never be used to increase the ranks of women in the financial services industry are legislation - as is the case in Norway, where it's mandatory for publicly owned companies to appoint a certain number of women to their management boards - and company-enforced affirmative action. "I would like to think it would never come to that," she says. Dabarno, Sherwood and Knight echo the sentiment. "We always focus on the right person for the job," Knight says. "It just happens that, increasingly often, that person is a woman." IE