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By Megan Brodie 2022

ST Boss is Comfortably Outnumbered



Carlo Montagner (centre) with some of ST's female employees.

At homegrown pharma company Specialised Therapeutics, 82 per cent of employees are women, three in every four employees is aged over 40, and nine of the 12 executive team members is female.

Age, gender, and ethnicity are not a consideration when hiring, says CEO Carlo Montagner, who instead employs people that best fit with the values of the

business he co-founded with his wife, Bozena Zembrzuski.

“We are not gender-quota focused, we are just focused on the needs of the business,” Montagner says. “When hiring, we focus on the values of a person and ask ourselves, ‘are those values consistent with the values of the company?’ That is paramount. Everything else is a distraction.”

While this perspective has resulted in Specialised Therapeutics’ (ST) workforce being heavily skewed towards females, Montagner is more than comfortable being among a minority of male employees at the company – and he thinks it is good for the business.

“Are we concerned that our workforce comprises too few men? No, it has never come up in any leadership discussions, or any other discussion,” Montagner says. “Those sorts of attributes are not a factor in our recruiting policy.”

“We have just hired a woman over 60, meaning we now have three women aged over 60, and neither their age nor their gender was ever a factor in our decision making. We were purely focused on their talent and competencies.

“We have always sought the best candidates for a role regardless of gender, age or ethnicity. It is all based on merit.”

Montagner is not alone in Australian pharma in being a male leader who strongly supports women, although he credits three women in particular for helping shape his perspective: his wife Bozena, his mother, and Merck Healthcare CEO Belén Garijo.

Zembrzuski had her own successful pharma career when they founded ST, says Montagner, adding she was “very, very good at what she did”.

“There are a lot of decisions made that look on the surface like they have come just from me, but they have come after lengthy discussions and guidance from Bozena,” he adds.

Montagner says his mother was a great mentor and role model for him as she worked six days a week for 40 years running a factory while managing the family finances.

“She ran everything,” he says while with Garijo, he “inherited her as a boss” when they both worked at Aventis in the US.

“I had absolutely no issues and learned a lot from Belén in terms of drive, tenacity and real persistence in getting very difficult jobs done. I also learned about managing upwards because she was very good at managing the senior executives at Aventis, which at the time was a huge company.

“I have always had very strong women in my life so am extremely comfortable being in a situation where ST employs so many women. For me, it is normal.”

“Women offer a degree of empathetic perspective that men sometimes don’t have. They also tend to be less ego-driven and more focused on the task. Speaking in general terms, men can be distracted by other factors that are not really at the core of the issue that needs to be resolved.”

With a career spanning three decades in the pharmaceutical industry, Montagner is not surprised the industry now employs more women than men and believes pharma “lends itself to attracting and retaining women in key roles”.

“It is a great industry for women to aspire to work in,”; he says. “You see women staying in the industry for pretty much their entire career - the age profile in our company reflects that.

“It is good for women to know that the statistics demonstrate this is an industry that really celebrates and supports people’s longevity. I would describe it as a highly-professional environment.”