

Flexibility equals equality: Interview with Romanie Thomas, founder of Juggle

Maddyness speaks to talent advisor-turned-founder Romanie Thomas about the gender gap in the workplace – and the change in approach needed to tackle it. Is freedom and flexibility the key for companies and employees?

Romanie Thomas used to work as a headhunter. She joined the workplace with a whole cohort of women, and steadily rose up the ranks. But then, after several years, she looked around and wondered where all the women had gone. Why was she only speaking to men – male clients, male candidates, male directors?

“It coincided with the time when a lot of my girlfriends were leaving to have babies and were really struggling to re-enter the workforce, which felt very last-century,” Romanie tells me.

“Work has been geared to one very specific type of person, generally a man, generally someone who is reasonably well-off at these management level roles – who has a partner who can look after their children. In the modern world, we’re realising that that doesn’t work for anyone – not for men or women or the kids. We need to stop pretending that it does.”

The gender pay gap stands at 8.9%, and has only decreased by 0.6% since 2012. As of October 2019, only eight women held CEO roles in the FTSE 250.

That's just over 3%. Clearly, there's a problem. And for Romanie, flexibility in the workplace – standard across many professions, but certainly not when it comes to white collar mid/senior level positions – emerges as a standout solution.

“If there was a silver bullet to solving the gender gap I think flexible working is number one, but things like shared paternity leave are also super important.”

“Philosophically, if we gave people more freedom, that's kind of a win-win for everyone. At the moment, we have a situation where businesses are paying a high amount of maternity leave – so the corporates win and the SMEs are penalised. On the face of it, it makes more sense to hire men, because otherwise you're going to pay more in maternity leave. But that's just stupid. Nobody wins in that situation.”

“Flexibility, and embracing a lot of the automation that's coming through technology in a positive way, means that people can have a bit more fluidity about how they work. Less face-to-face time, less pressure to be in the office and perform, much more focus on collaboration and outcomes. Kids can see their parents more, and companies are not under that huge amount of pressure to pay out as well, which alleviates the government a little.”

Romanie left her headhunter job to embrace a more holistic, more inclusive approach to recruitment. She created Juggle, which helps connect employers with part-time, high-level talent, after noticing no such service existed beyond job boards and individual brand initiatives.

Juggle deals with both companies and professionals. For the former group, Romanie says, it's “reinventing the way that careers operate”. As an antidote to the ‘degree to grad scheme to (eventually) partner’ food chain, Juggle “helps people have long term relationships with companies, maybe two or three at one time, over a two to three year period.”

Juggle is helpful for companies also, Romanie continues, because it means they no longer have to compromise. “That's what small businesses have to do. Because they can't afford top dollar in time or money, they end up getting

people who are perhaps not suitable. Maybe they rush the decision. It's really expensive."

"The one thing that you can compete on is flexibility. So, why don't you get great part time people for your business instead, and rethink and reshape?"

Though hiring looks set to slow down over 2021 and quite possibly beyond, COVID-19 has certainly changed the way businesses think about flexible, or at least blended, working – which quite possibly represents a blessing in disguise for the future of Juggle. [This survey](#) even suggests 9 in 10 millennials expect a more flexible working week moving forwards beyond the pandemic.

And what about equality in the workplace in general? Romanie recognises we still have a long way to go – and that flexible working won't solve everything. When I ask her about difficulties she's faced, she refers to the "very real barriers in her own head" – something I'm sure will resonate with many who don't fall into [the tech world's dominant demographic](#).

"I'm building a technology company which means raising venture capital. Doing that as a sole female founder, non-white, one doesn't experience obvious discrimination, but there are certainly subtle things that go on. One of the hardest things as well is you're just not operating and pitching to people who look or sound anything like you."

It's easy to feel paralysed when [it's predicted that](#) gender parity won't be achieved for 100 years. "That seems too long for us – and it is too long."

"But at the same time we need to take a step back and realise that we're trying to undo centuries worth of the way that things were."

[Discover Juggle](#)

COVID-19 has shaken up everyone's routine in a big way. Not everyone lives like Mark Wahlberg, but at Maddyness we're interested in the tips, tricks and rules the founders we interview live by – as inspiration and proof that there's no 'one way' to be a founder.

So, we're asking everyone we interview: do you have a ridiculous CEO-style morning routine? If not, tell us how your days normally unfold and the rules you live by.

"I tend to get up and journal, and then I meditate, and then I will do a workout of some description – normally something reasonably high-intensity, most days. Then breakfast, shower and straight into it. That first 90 minutes of the day – I start reasonably early, like 6/6.30, and it's all about me and getting myself prepared."

Article by FLORENCE WILDBLOOD