

# Learning to infiltrate the old boy network

Tracey Williams is helping women get ahead in business. Michael Ribbeck hears how

**W**hen it comes to the movers and shakers of the corporate world, Bristol has always had a reputation as being a closed club populated by a select few.

And although the world of high finance and big business has changed dramatically in recent years, many of the cosy corporate establishments have survived intact.

The lingering suspicion remains that the 'old boy network' still casts a long shadow over a city which is fast gaining a reputation for being one of the most important finance centres in the UK.

But people such as Tracey Williams are quietly working away at forcing their way into the established order.

Tracey, 39, is one of the most senior female business specialists in Bristol and in charge of the corporate finance team at accountancy firm Burton Sweet.

Each year her team is responsible for about 30 deals, and she gets involved personally in each and every one.

Tracey admits that from the age of 11 she wanted to be an accountant.

It is a measure of her energy that she plans to celebrate her 40th birthday on a hiking trip along the Inca Trail in Peru.

There is no such thing as an easy life for her, and it is obvious from the outset that the main focus of her life is her



Sweet's Williams: Tracey Williams who is in charge of the corporate finance team at accountancy firm Burton Sweet

career. This is not a woman who takes on the establishment but someone who uses her drive and expertise to prove she is a worthy equal to her peers.

Tracey said: "I have always believed that if you work hard enough at something you can achieve what you want."

"I work in a hard environment but that has not stopped me achieving my goals."

Like most people who mix

in business circles, Tracey quickly realised that the numerous social gatherings and dinners where contacts are made and deals cemented were male-dominated.

Forcing open the doors of the establishment can be a tricky proposition for a woman.

And after making her mark in the world of deals and finance, Tracey decided to do something to help fellow

members of her sex get on in the corporate world.

Last spring, Tracey set up the Corporate Finance Network - an informal group for women working in the West Country. The organisation now has 30 members who meet regularly to swap advice, tips and contacts.

And Tracey has been at the sharp end of enough deals and negotiations to know the best way to go about business. She

said: "At first there was a fair amount of suspicion from the big companies."

"They wanted to know why there should be an organisation for women only."

"But that suspicion has largely gone now and many companies encourage their staff to join us."

"Networking is a vital part of the business but it isn't always easy for women to go to the events. Our group offers

an alternative way of going about business."

Tracey said there was a difference between men and women when it comes to doing business: "With men there tends to be a lot of posturing and clashing egos. There is always a 'dance' that goes on during negotiations," she said. "With women, somehow it is different. There is a different approach which can often make things easier."

## South West employers more likely to hire than most of UK

Businesses in the South West are reporting the strongest hiring plans in the UK after London for the last three months of the year, according to employment expert Manpower.

The Manpower Employment Outlook Survey, a quarterly study of hiring trends based on a poll of over 2,100 employers, found that eleven per cent of South West employers expected to increase their headcounts in the next

three months, four per cent planned to reduce staff numbers and 85 per cent of employers anticipated no change to staffing levels.

The hiring rate is a slight decrease of one percentage point on the current quarter, but a drop of seven percentage points on the year. South West hiring plans are significantly above the UK average of -1 per cent.

Across the rest of the country, London employers are no-

table for their hiring confidence; only one per cent plan cut-backs and nine per cent plan to add to their headcount giving an overall outlook of eight per cent.

Overall one per cent of employers in the East anticipate hiring levels above the national average.

The most movement is expected in the North East jobs market where only 65 per cent of employers expect to keep hiring levels the same, with 16

per cent planning to make reductions and 13 per cent intending to add to headcount, giving an overall outlook of -3 per cent. Employers in the South East (-9 per cent) report the weakest hiring confidence of all regions surveyed.

Four of the nine business sectors report a hiring confidence above the national average (-1 per cent). Utilities employers are the most optimistic of those surveyed this quarter reporting an overall

outlook of eight per cent. Manufacturing employers (+3 per cent) are also bucking the national trend as are those in the transport and communications (+3 per cent) and the community and social (+2 per cent) sectors. Construction employers are cautious about their hiring, with an outlook of -10 per cent, a decline of 19 percentage points on the year. Employers across all sectors report a high no-change figure (above 75 per cent).

Andrew Sheppard, Manpower's operations manager for the South West, said: "Employers in the South West are still hiring despite the precarious business climate, but the rate has slowed significantly. Alongside this we've seen a real pick-up in the demand for temporary staff."

"Many employers are using the staff they have, moving people around internally and are taking a wait-and-see approach to future recruitment."