

# Action Woman

An interview with the woman who's mantra is, that in the food service industry, 'It's not about your qualifications; it's all down to you and what energy you put into your career'.

Wendy Bartlett, Managing Director at Bartlett Mitchell talks with **Esther Rutter** at the FSI Council



"When I went to college I had no idea I was going to end up running a multi-million pound company," Wendy Bartlett tells me, "But that's the great thing about the food service industry. It's not about your qualifications; it's all down to you and what energy you put into your career."

Wendy Bartlett is formidable. From her beginnings in the industry, working with her sister helping her while working in a club in Kensington, then later working as a hotel receptionist while gaining her OND at Ealing College (now University of West London), to the establishment of Bartlett Mitchell and overseeing its growth into a £18.5m business, to her place in the Woman 1st Top 100 Women in Hospitality list; her achievements are testimony to her drive and passion.

She is passionate about her business of course. But, more than that, she's passionate about the industry and the opportunities it offers - or rather should be offering - young people: "It's all about experience. No matter what

qualifications you have in this industry, we all have to start on the same basis and very often, the rewards are there for those people that put in the effort and go the extra mile." Wendy has certainly achieved those rewards, but does everyone? "Look at the success achieved by the chefs that have come up through the kitchens. Look at the big companies and at the people running them. Not all of them have a university degree; a few still come from craft backgrounds and have progressed up through the ranks of the industry. There are not many industries that you can do that in."

It is frustrating to her that the sector doesn't attract the recognition it should do. Is the sector missing out on an opportunity to attract the best and brightest? "This is an extraordinary industry to work in, which offers amazing opportunities! Hundreds of thousands of people have developed long, fulfilling and prosperous careers. The industry

also has more than its fair share of people who have succeeded and become wealthy in the process too ... it should be a real inspiration for people."

Wendy and her colleagues firmly believe that food has an incredibly important role to play in society and it needs addressing at a governmental level: "We have to educate children about food. Now the Government is reintroducing free lunches for young primary school children and cooking classes are back on the agenda, which is a great thing. Taking them off did untold damage.

But we also need to make sure we are bringing people out of the education system who see hospitality as a real opportunity and have the work ethic that's needed. "Recognising the value of the industry through the creation of a dedicated minister would help to address the failure to attract enough young people to the sector and help it deliver more in terms of opportunity, diversity and skills", argues Wendy.

"Our sector is one of the biggest employers in the UK and yet the Government continues to play down its importance. It generated one in four of all new jobs created between 2010 and 2012, and hospitality is the fourth largest industry in the UK," says Wendy.

One of the initiatives Wendy is involved in is the 'Cut Tourism VAT' campaign in conjunction with the British Hospitality Association (BHA). This is the kind of initiative a dedicated government minister could address she says: "There's a lot of evidence that if we reduce the VAT on tourism and leisure, it would actually put back more into the economy than it would cost and generate huge numbers of new jobs. Why aren't we doing it? It's the same with the Chinese Visa system.

Although some improvements have recently been made, we (as a country) have been deterring people who want to come because of the complexity of the

visa system. We've been losing revenue from the third largest tourism spender because they're going to Paris instead."

Corporate Social Responsibility is an area that is close to Wendy and her business partners' hearts. Having just been crowned Sustainable Caterer of the Year by the SRA (Sustainable Restaurant Association), it's clear that they take the matter seriously.

First, there's the green initiatives. Bartlett Mitchell is the first contract caterer to achieve the top three-star rating from the Sustainable Restaurant Association (SRA), and was the first contract caterer to achieve a Green Tourism Accreditation for one of its operations. "Our CSR policy is actually about understanding you can't do everything," says Wendy. "It's also understanding that it can't be purely board-led. It has to engage the hearts and minds of your team members and customers, otherwise it's just a PR

exercise. Our company 'green' superstars, Hannah Carmichael and Sally Grimes, drive what we do on a sustainability front, and the catering teams drive it with their customers as well."

This strategy has resulted in varied initiatives for each site such as working towards the sponsorship of a drinking water well in Africa; reducing bin waste and plate waste; reducing the amount of air-freighted produce used; setting formal water-saving targets; and undertaking charitable work.

Then there is the commitment to developing talent: "I believe in everyone having the same opportunities, regardless of whether they are male or female. If somebody has the passion, the commitment and the time, it is all up to them to see how far they can take their career and we'll support them along the way. In all industries there are successful women and the opportunities are there.



*US pharmaceutical giant Quintiles European HQ in Green Park, Reading, Berkshire where Bartlett Mitchell serves 500 of its 2,000 UK staff*

Sometimes however, women just have other priorities and it's about finding the right employer that allows you the flexibility and space to develop in the way you need to. We're a very family-friendly employer. We're very flexible, and we value our talent."

Talent management is a two-way street, says Wendy: "Many people have been with us a long time. Most of the women here at head office started with us part-time because of their children. They stayed with us and now they are full-time in more managerial positions. You only get that if you have given and get back on both sides."

Personal growth and development are key themes of our conversation, and Wendy practices what she preaches, both as policy within Bartlett Mitchell and for herself: "I still learn. I'm always learning. On a personal level I'm leaning Spanish – although I never seem to get any better - and professionally, I'm part of a CEO development group called Vistage. It's interesting to see hospitality compared to other industries. In my view, hospitality is a much more visual, enthusiastic, passionate, people-type industry to be in. The people who do well are the people who are passionate about it."

Attracting the right talent to the business is vital. Then there is the 'stickiness'; the things that keep you where you work. For Bartlett Mitchell, this means creating a positive environment and topping up everyone's 'emotional bank account', as Wendy explains: "It's saying 'hello', making time for people, it's the birthday card, it's remembering someone's 50th, it's the tenure celebrations, it's knowing that people make the difference."

This word 'stickiness' (attributed to one of her business partners) crops up again when we talk about the changing economic climate. Stickiness is a driver towards Bartlett Mitchell's offering, according to Wendy: "Now we're coming out of the recession of the last few years, clients are really having to think about how they retain all their great people. It's known as 'the Google effect'.

It is getting tough to find and retain the best talent so they cannot look at their services from a predominantly financial basis any more. They want their employees to say that they work at this really great place and they have these nice breakout areas, and the company cares about their health, and that they're eating healthily; in other words, their employer thinks and cares about what their employees' days are like at work. Today, it's not just about salaries; it's about the whole experience. Our clients are coming to us, asking us how we can help, and we need to share that vision."

I wonder how she manages to keep so many plates spinning? "It is more demanding," Wendy agrees. "People want food and service at a much faster pace. But when they eat they still want that relaxing environment and expectations are higher.

When I was growing up, eating out was a treat. Now people often eat out more than they eat at home and the Sunday Roast at home has become their treat."

"The huge growth in consumer awareness of food from the media, and people's experiences of eating out, mean that the expectations of today's consumers are much higher than say, ten to twenty years ago. It's a challenge though because price expectations in the workplace have not risen in line with quality/variety/menu expectations so caterers have to juggle all these

demands much more today."

According to Wendy, agility is the answer, "It's tough out there. Anyone coming into this market now has to hit the ground running and your business must be agile enough to change continuously. Even ten years ago, just after we started, it was less complex and easier."

She emphasises the need to focus on what you're good at and communicate this effectively. "It's easy to get clouded by so much information, you don't know where to focus.

We have a lot more information available to us nowadays, but I'm not sure that people use it any better. Before, I think, people used to manage more with less information. For example, when you sit down in a management meeting and you're busy looking at the figures: what does this mean? How does that work? You're often having conversations about the data – not what you're going to do about it."

To combat this phenomenon, Bartlett Mitchell has introduced a new way of presenting management information in easy-to-understand graphical 'dashboards'. The practical tool seems indicative of Wendy's own dynamic approach and the agility she prizes within the business. Wendy says: "It's great having information, but we don't want to be paralysed by it. If you're talking about the data, you're focusing on the now, not the future. And I don't want to focus on the data, I want to look at what we're going to do with it next."

The FSI Council Industry Leaders Interviews are a series of discussions with food industry executives who speak out on everything from the future of the industry, food and innovation, the importance of training, the key moments that have influenced their own careers and lots more. © FSI Council 2014