

Interview with Zara Lababedi

1. When did you decide you wanted to work in finance? And what attracted you to it?

It was a coincidence actually... I had already started doing my MA in Sociology when my professor had noticed my strong capabilities in mathematics and advised me to pursue studies in that field. It just happened that AUB was launching its new Money and Banking division so I seized this opportunity and enrolled in it.

2. What were the main obstacles you faced when you first started out?

For me, being a committed mother and wife, was my main priority. However, it was hard at first to manage a family while pursuing a career, so multitasking and juggling between my duties at home and my studies/work was my main daily challenge. I was constantly aiming to balance between my responsibilities as a mother/wife and as a university student.

3. Do you think your career path was harder for you as a woman, than your male peers?

I believe women have to work much harder than men to earn her position in the workplace. And women definitely should have an outstanding character and skills to obtain what other men obtain easily.

4. In the UK there are debates that the 'glass - ceiling' may no longer be an issue; however I strongly disagree with these arguments. As an Arab woman, myself, I am really interested in learning about what you think about the 'glass ceiling' theory, and whether you feel you have been able to overcome this in Lebanon? And if so, how?

I was always eager to learn as I believed education was the only weapon that safe guarded me; it helped me push myself forward and strive to evolve in the workspace. Unfortunately this theory still exists especially in the Arab world where a woman should work harder to prove herself at work. Despite the fact that many women have been able to move forward the glass-ceiling, few men acknowledge their success. At the end of the day, even though men think of themselves as more powerful than women, they will acknowledge women's success whenever women prove themselves to be unique influential individuals. They will always look at you as a successful "person" and not a successful "woman".

5. What do you look for in your team members? - What qualities are most important in the people you surround yourself with?

It is very important for me that team members take on responsibility and be committed to their job for me to rely on them to get the job done on time and provide consistent quality work. Taking Initiative is another quality I aspire to have among my team members. They should be able to step outside their comfort zones, and come up with creative ideas, understand my vision and share my objectives. Communication is key in order to share ideas and opinions.

6. As a business leader, what qualities intrinsic to yourself do you think have enabled you to be successful?

I believe the secret to my success is my perseverance, hardworking skills, strategic thinking and interest in keeping up with the latest technology trends and innovations. In every product I created, I paid attention to the smallest details and added my own feminine touch and unique sentiment which added value to the product i.e while picking the features, design and, packaging for example, the shine mirror card or even the Loubnani card that has a special cedar scent to remind its holder of Lebanon.

7. Do you think there is a difference in leadership styles between the genders?

In my opinion, women in managerial positions tend to stress on the importance of communication, cooperation, and nurture more than men do in the same positions. However, globally, I don't believe there is a significant difference between the behaviors of male and female leaders; with the same degree of power, opportunity and vision, the imperative leadership traits are visible in both genders.

8. Who would you say influenced you the most in your career, and what qualities did you admire in them?

When I started my career, I wasn't influenced by anyone. However with time, I started to admire every person that has vision and is passionate about his work. Steve Jobs is a great example of a leader who wouldn't take no for an answer. I personally admire his leadership style, and I relate to his strong vision and passionate thinking .

9. Do you believe people are born leaders, or is it something that can be learned?

I believe that people are born leaders with certain traits of character such as social intelligence, charisma. I also believe that leadership skills differentiates people from each others. Only good leaders are those who develop themselves and seize training opportunities and learn from experiences. Inner traits may help you draw people's attention, only business knowledge, life experiences, and education help you become a successful leader.

10. What advice would you give to girls wanting to enter the financial world? Does it differ than what you would teach boys?

I believe that the people's perception towards boys is still different than the one towards girls in our culture which is also reflected in the way parents raise and educates their children. We should all work on changing that wrong impression to offer both genders the same equal learning opportunities. It the parent's role to educate and guide them evenly in achieving what they are passionate about. Finance is a field where any girl can excel as much as boys given that she has the perfect required knowledge and skills.