



Take on Board

Transcript – Jan Easton

Helga Svendsen

Today on the Take On Board Podcast, I'm speaking with Jan Easton, about increasing women's representation in the boardroom and her recent report Achieving Scale Breaking Through Barriers for Female Founders. First, let me tell you about Jan. Jan is a founding member and certified Chair of the Advisory Board Center. And she has served as Advisory Board Chair for several private organisations, including a national hospitality franchise and marketing agency. Jan has extensive senior management experience in the franchise and professional services industries. Originally from the US at just 21 years old, Jan became general manager of a global software company, disrupting a traditional industry well before disruption was celebrated. Welcome to the Take On Board Podcast, Jan.

Jan Easton

Thank you Helga, It's lovely to be here.

Helga Svendsen

So Jan, before we talk about advisory boards about your report about achieving scale and women's representation in the boardroom, I'd love to just dig a little bit deeper about you. Can you tell me a story about young Jan, that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today.

Jan Easton

I think really, I can't go past the experience that I have been a very young manager in a very traditional industry. So to give a bit of context for that when I was in uni, I had an opportunity to start working in a friend's business, in the sign industry and the digital printing industry, which is something I knew absolutely nothing about. And I thought it would be just a, you know, a uni job where you just sort of fill in the gaps and focus on school. But in that role, the manager at that time started to develop a software program because the current workflow management program was an old DOS based system and didn't really do what it needed to. And in that process, he tapped me on the shoulder and said, You seem to have a good head on your shoulders. Do you want to come over here? I had no intention of ever doing technology or software. I was still at uni thinking I was actually going to be on a bit of a medical path and I thought, why not? Let's give it a go, went in knowing absolutely nothing about computers very little about technology. But I knew how to think. And I knew how to ask questions. So I went in and very shortly I was the GM of that business. And we

serve as global franchise companies that worked in the sign industry. So I was going into these boardrooms with men and women that were much more experienced than me. And I knew that I wasn't the most experienced person in the room, what I could be was the most curious. And so I just took that opportunity to ask as many questions as I could, and try to learn as much about their needs and their business. And what was interesting out of that is it showed me that they maybe weren't the smartest people in the room, either. Because there were elements that are areas about their business that they didn't know or understand. And through that process of curiosity and questioning, it meant we could learn together and so age wasn't really barrier. Once we both decided that, let's just put that to the side, we can't change that. So I had to be very conscious of not being the young upstart thinking I knew everything, or new different, as well as they had to be really open to saying, you might not have the 30 years of experience, but there's value here. So that I think really has informed my entire professional career that that feeling of curiosity, and wanting to arrive at a destination together.

Helga Svendsen

And it's it's such a beautiful example about diversity in the boardroom generally, and having younger people that ask that aren't afraid to ask those questions.

Jan Easton

Absolutely. Or even the more experienced directors that might be coming up against challenges that aren't within their skill set, to know that they can be really curious and vulnerable in their approach by saying, I actually don't understand this or this isn't something that I have experienced. Tell me more. Help me get there together and recognising that that's actually not a weakness.

Helga Svendsen

Actually, it's interesting you say that about curiosity and even being younger, and obviously you're talking about being 21. But if you know, obviously children, children are so curious about everything in the endless wise in everything, it's it's actually a great skill to have in the boardroom.

Jan Easton

Absolutely. And I think that that feeling of curiosity is why I like the, for example, the advisory board space so much, because to me, the core of a really good advisory board is about closing knowledge gaps. Yeah, you're supporting organisations to go from where they are today to where they want to be in the future. And often they they have an idea of a pathway, but they may not know is that the most efficient? Is that the best way to get there? What else am I missing? What haven't I considered? So you can really have that peer based discussion, which is I think so important that a board level, when sometimes it's looked at as a power based discussion, you've got the board that's

supposed to be above the CEO, or above the executive team. When really you need the board, working shoulder to shoulder With those groups, it needs to be more of a peer based discussion rather than that sort of command in control based discussion.

Helga Svendsen

We've almost gone into that topic for today. But I'm just going to hold back on that for just a moment more, because I would love to know something from the last month or so that you're proud of.

Jan Easton

I think the current environment, if we really look at what's been happening in this, this COVID environment where everybody is trying to adapt and change and be resilient and open to new technologies and new ways of working. I think, for me, what I'm really proud of is both bringing to my own work and the work that I'm able to do with others this sense of empathy. You know, we're on a podcast now we're recording from home, there's a good chance that a dog is going to bark or a neighbor is going to decide to start doing their, you know, lawn mowing or something like that. If I look at it through the lens of being a woman in business, there's been times especially when my children were little, and I was working from home, and I felt very apologetic about the fact that I was human, and that there were things that might come into into play. So you would say, I'm really sorry, but can you give me a moment? You know, I just have to put the kid in the other room or there might be some noise, I'm really sorry. And with that came the sense that it was less than or I wasn't being as professional. And I think not just this last month, but really the last couple of months when people have all been on a level playing field working from home. I've been really proud of the empathy it's brought. I've brought to the conversations and it's brought to the conversations with other people to say, we don't have to apologise for being human. And what we bring is no less professional if it's not perfect.

Helga Svendsen

Again, two beautiful qualities in the boardroom curiosity and empathy, and could not agree more that the last few months have been a great leveler. Today we want to talk about representation in the boardroom, whether it's advisory boards, or whether it's governance boards or owners, founders, whatever it may be, and you've also done some research recently, you've done a report around achieving scale breaking through barriers for female founders. We might start there actually, can you take us through some of the key parts of that research, what it was about what you found, and what advice that might give for people on boards, whether that's advisory boards or governance boards.

Jan Easton

It really builds on that theme of curiosity. I think good research starts from a place of curiosity, where you've got to dig into the data, not really knowing what you might find. And that's really what this particular research piece was. It was born out of the work that we're able to do with the advisory board center, on through two specific initiatives that we have one is around supporting female founders. So there's women in business. And then the other one is around advancing women on board. So making sure that there's more representation at all seats around the board table, whether that's as the executive, the owner, the director, or the advisor. So as an outcome of this particular piece of research, and that curiosity piece, which was the genesis point for it, what we saw is that when we looked at female led businesses as compared to the overall business population, such as both men and women in business, we found that women were no less ambitious in what they wanted to achieve in their business. But they maybe weren't achieving the same results within the same time period. So in the research, we found around 65% of female led businesses were under the \$500,000 annual revenue mark. And they stayed smaller for longer. And we thought, What's going on there? There's got to be something there because there's two real driving factors. One, we've had a massive increase in female entrepreneurship and female led businesses in the market and a lot of that's off the back of the good work so many people are doing to encourage women to go into business. But if you look at the real economic potential and the economic return on that you've got founder ambitions and more women saying we want to do more? And we want to be bigger or be able to increase our impact. But then you have this unrealized ambition that's happening, why aren't they getting there? Why isn't that happening more? How can we help more of those women's scale when they have the desire to so this is really looking at, not women that go into business and choose to right size their business. So I only want to grow to a certain point, or I only want to have a business of a certain size, it's really digging into that cohort that say, I want to increase my impact. And that impact factor could be revenue, it could be non revenue measures as well. They're just looking to be able to scale that. So that's really what we started to dig into in this particular piece of research. And we found that it's not well, there's some big factors, things like funding, access to support networks, and the personal time management and personal constraints that women might have. It's actually the more nuanced conversations underneath that that are really going to make the difference and are areas that I think boards should really be looking at, both in terms of what it might mean for their own businesses, but also what it might mean for themselves within the wider ecosystem. Do they have a strategy for procurement around female led businesses? What does their diversity and inclusion actually look like in the way that they interact in the bigger ecosystem of that, as well as if they actually are a female founded business? How can the board or the support networks really make sure that they're looking at the particular challenges or perceived barriers that might be in place for that business?

Helga Svendsen

When you were describing that I noted and you picked it up a little bit that you were talking about impact. It's not just inverted commas about profitability. It's not just about revenue, and you're talking impact from the research, how impact was defined and how that part of it came about.

Jan Easton

So we really looked at in terms of scale, and scale being about increasing impact through financial and non financial measures, we didn't actually ask women to define what those were because they could be so buried, was more looking at this concept of scale really has two parts. You've got the growing and expanding the business, and they say in a proportional, and hopefully profitable way. But the other one is about reaching full potential. It's that full potential piece that I think is really interesting, because that's where it really allows for that diversity and variety of what is the potential of my business. And what I can achieve. Though, in the research, we even though we looked at that \$500,000 revenue point, and we came to that really based on the information that was provided by the cohort, we had participants from pre revenue all the way through to about \$200 million businesses. And we looked at the different impacts and factors between what are you doing, what do you plan to do, and what do you think the best barriers are going to be to stop you from achieving that result. So I think when we look at that in terms of even in social enterprises or impact organisations, the reality is they still need money and funds to achieve what they they need to do. It's just how they might or portion that and what other measures they use to say, we're realizing our potential and our ambition.

Helga Svendsen

I want to swing back to what you'd said about procurement and having diversity in the ecosystem. Carol Schwartz had recently been in the media quite a bit around, essentially shareholder activism supporting gender equity. And I'm wondering what your views are around that and how that might link with some of the findings of the research that you did.

Jan Easton

A lot of the, I guess, top level conversation around supporting women in business goes straight to funding. And then there's the pieces that get rolled out around saying less than 2% of venture capital goes to female led businesses. And what it does is it really channels the conversation through a very narrow lens. Because equity funding is just one way to fund a business, and not all women want to actually give up a piece of their business to external investors. So when we really just sort of focus on that conversation, it's at the expense of the wider discussion and the more nuanced ways that people can have effect, like the shareholder activism to be able to say, what else are we doing? So this is a conversation that's about an end, rather than an or so it's not just enough to say we'll throw more funds at something you need money and other things. So that's where when we look, for example, at the role of government or very large organisations, a lot of people will look to government and say government has a role to put more money behind female founders. Yes, maybe. But there's other ways that they can also impact the trajectory of female founders and one of those is looking at things like procurement strategies. How does government make it easier for not just female owned businesses, but those small medium In size enterprises in general to be able to interact with them. How does government use their influence to look at policy based decisions along the whole education stream? Because what we know is if we're only focusing on the women

that are here now, it's at the expense of developing that entire pipeline of talent. It's like quotas on a board. On one side of my mind, I'm very egalitarian and saying everyone should be there based on their own merit and the value that they provide. But the reality is, we know there isn't a stick behind it to actually force change. And we can't get to that point where we're able to say, it's just people on board. It's not women on boards, not men on boards. It's the best possible people to achieve the result for that. We're not there yet. And I see it not just from a gender diversity lens, but also a diversity of skillset. lens. There are people who say why don't we have more people with for example, cybersecurity skill sets on boards. Why don't we have both People with stakeholder engagement skill sets on boards. We haven't cracked the binary male female thing yet where we're not into that more nuanced conversation. So one of the things that we looked at in this research was how can we actually enable people to focus on the nuanced conversations, because sometimes the big picture things are too hard for an individual to shift. But we can do lots of small actions and work together on these micro actions that are then going to change the tide,

Helga Svendsen

Leveling the playing field, so that we can actually get to equal Yeah, makes perfect sense.

Jan Easton

And I think that the thing that really shone through for me and the research, both in terms of the actual hard data as well as the conversations that were had around this is, it's not easy to be in business, but women aren't looking for it to be easy. They're looking for it to be fair, and they want to be able to have exposure to the same opportunities to grow and develop their business but also to fail in business if that's what happen. In the same as male counterparts, and if you look at it across the board, there are some times where failures, when a man is leading the business is celebrated as learning, you know, fail fast, go hard, all of those types of things. Whereas then for the women, it might be then couched in an ability question. It makes it very cautious then to also express potential or ambition. And one of the key conversations that we've been able to have around this research is really empowering women to not be apologetic for ambition, it's okay to say I want to grow my business. It's equally okay to say I'm not exactly sure how I'm going to get there. Right. And I need some help around me to be able to do that. So I think when we look at it from the impact that boards can have when looking at this, so if you're a director and you're going onto a board with a female CEO, or female founder, it's not about going thinking that there's going to be a deficit there in confidence. deficit inability. But we all have knowledge deficits, saying, How can I really advocate for this particular business to increase the competence in decision making that comes from that increase the access to the skill sets and the abilities, but take a real role, again, shoulder to shoulder with that particular executive or founder or CEO to say, we've got big ambitions and we're going to get there together.

You know, it sounds like that. That's no different to any new, you know, whether it's a female lead company or any lead company, the role of the board, whatever sort of board it is, is to do exactly

that to value add to the organization to stand shoulder to shoulder to support the founder or the CEO. In that, and I guess it's recognized, it sounds like it's partly about recognizing, you might need to support women in different ways, in some ways, but but but it's not, you know, it's not different.

Helga Svendsen

Yeah, it's different, but not different. Exactly,

Jan Easton

And it's the nuanced differences. And this is why we keep talking about that is it's not dissimilar to some of the debate about just having, you know, boards with more women. I think when we polarize the discussion into a better than discussion, it naturally creates a tension that moves us away from where we want to be. So in the work that I've been able to do with advancing women on boards, but also with female founders, I think the better than conversation is limiting. So rather than it being about boards with women are better than boards without women. It's a matter of saying business is tough. And if you don't have the best minds around you, you're making the job harder on yourself than it needs to be. And if you're excluding a really fantastic part of the population, then you're really missing out on what the end goal is. So we can say it's different. Yeah, rather than better than so. Women are different in the way that they run their businesses. and manage their businesses than men. And that's okay. So it's not about saying it has to be the same way. But if we recognize those nuanced differences, and then look to the different parts of the ecosystem to say, how can you contribute? And how can you make this better? That's what we actually did create that level playing field. That has, we're saying we're catering to those nuanced differences in a way that's really meaningful, rather than everything being the same. Oh,

Helga Svendsen

I made the note about 10 minutes ago in our conversation, which feels like a eons ago, because we've moved on, but I wanted to come back to it. You talked about some of the barriers that you'd identified. Can you talk us through that?

Jan Easton

Absolutely. there really were four key things that came out in the the barriers for female founders looking to scale their business. And I'll just kind of talk through those because the it helps to really, I think, elevate the conversation rather than particular statistics. It's about saying, What might this look like? One of the key things was around the delegation threshold. So recognizing that \$500,000 mark is a real key decision point for a lot of women in business, because it's that point that you have to move beyond your own capability and start delegating out to other people. You may have one or two people working with you or doing some task based work for you. But to make that next leap to

become a \$1.5 million business or 5 million \$10 million business, it's a very different business to run. So recognizing that delegation threshold, and then what are the specific skills or support you need around you to make that leap. The other one was around business investment literacy. Again, if we go back to that conversation about more funds flowing through to female founders, we focus a lot on financial literacy. But women are all over that. They understand the cash flow, they understand those things and if they don't understand that they know exactly where to go to get that knowledge. What's a bit of a gap is a business investment literacy. So one, how do you position your business for investment now, whether that are funding I should say, because that could be bank funding that could be equity funding those various ways. What are you going to do with the money? Once you have it to significantly grow your business, not just fund operations, but significantly grow your business? And that's a real gap in that that knowledge that sits there about saying, We don't just want the money to poor cash flow, what are we actually going to do to really grow it? The other one is around the execution gap. So we did find that the women were incredibly confident in their ability, if they only had the time or the money. And what that really shows to me is that there's probably a bit of a gap about that, how are you actually going to execute on that? And do you have the skills and ability and support networks to help you get there because what we know is money doesn't fix everything, and sometimes having too much money. Money can actually cloud a little bit of decision making and prioritization. So it's separating out the traditional narrative is that women need to be more confident. But it's not competence and ability. It's confidence in decision making. Am I making the right decision right now? And do I have the right plans in place to execute on that decision, which is very different to confidence in my own ability? And the last real key thing was around who's got your back? And what are those support networks around you? Women tend to combine roles between Who are the people that support me as a founder in business versus who supports me personally. And we tend to mix those so that can happen everything from who we socialize with, and we combine the these are my friends in business as opposed to these are the people who helped me be better in business, to I need support for me personally. But those might not be the right people to give me business support or business advice that I need. And we see a real distinct shift in the females that have scaled their businesses the way they look at where they spend their time, who they spend their time with, and their expectations out of those relationships. So it's that shift from networking, to being networked. And this is a time I spend socializing. And I do that to be social. And that's it very, very important that I have those social networks. But these are my business networks. And these are the things that are going to support me in business and drive the outcomes in my business. So that who's got your back?

Helga Svendsen

Sounds to me like there might be some similarities in the way board members work as well having that personal support network as well as your professional network around you to support you for what's going on.

Jan Easton

Hmm. It's a key transition point, I think for females that are looking to move into the board space and that board portfolio, recognising that, again, this isn't about removing relationships. It's about Adding to and making sure you're really clear on where am I spending my time? What is the outcome I need and have purposeful conversations with the right people at the right time. So rather than socialising for advice, really going to the right people for the right advice. So that's a key part, I think in that transition for female founders about when do I go from having no board, to having a board, whether that's an advisory board or a governance board? When do I recognize I'm at that stage that I actually needed a different kind of support network around me? And then having high expectations is those people that sit on those seats, right? Yeah, it's not just who I know, it's who's actually going to challenge me and drive me to make this the best business it can possibly be.

Helga Svendsen

Back to the curiosity where we started right back at the start, sometimes the best support network around you, however, whether that's board or otherwise, the most annoying ones that just ask lots of annoying, difficult challenging questions. And there

Jan Easton

And recognising that those aren't, you know, they have to be delivered with empathy. But it's not about having people that challenge you is a good thing. You know, growth doesn't come from a place of comfort. I think for some women that can feel quite confrontational, especially when they identify, we hear anecdotally people will say, Well, my business is my baby, right? And so they emotionally identify with their business. And it makes it really hard for them to then take objective advice about that, because they, they've intertwined their personal worth with their professional profile or their business profile. So it can be really hard then to put yourself out there for things like investment, or to trust people who you don't know yet. And that's really important, I think in a board capacity because you might be looking to bring on board members that you don't have a previous relationship with. So you need to accelerate that trust and then know that when they might challenge you, it's not necessarily a person Challenge, it's really looking at it through the lens of you as a professional or your business.

Helga Svendsen

Yeah, and I think that that's a that's an important skill to learn. Again, there is so much we could be talking about here. And of course, I will make sure a link to this report is in the show notes. One of the main points you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today.

Jan Easton

I think the first thing is actually looking at supporting women in business is not a women's issue. It really is a business issue. And it's not a conversation that we can have without men in the room. And then really actively seeing this as a value proposition. At the moment. If we bring it back to the current environment we're looking at at a recession and a recession globally. What's really going to lift us out of that is innovative thinking and entrepreneurialism. So we can't get there alone. We've all got to get there together. And this is something that I see even when we initially released the research some men felt like they couldn't be part of the conversation because they weren't sure how to do that appropriately. The same way I would say to women dive in, I'd say there's two men dive right in to this conversation. Right? You need to be there together. So that's probably the first thing. The second one is I'd really encourage women to be curious about what else is going on out there. So whether you're on a board, or you're an executive, or you're looking to start your own business, be really, really curious about some of these potential challenges that you might come up against. So that you can be aware and prepared. That means you're less likely to take it personal, I see no nose, not an answer. It's a challenge. So if you get know about funding, it's a challenge to say find it elsewhere. If you get know about being on a particular board, it's a challenge to find a better home for your time and skills and experience. It's not an answer that says you can't move forward so that that really is a key thing that I'd like people to use this research to then build on and launch forward.

Helga Svendsen

Is there a resource that you would like to share With the take on board community.

Jan Easton

So I really like to ensure that people go and download this particular piece of research because it has so many applications whether people are internally as executives, like I said, they can look at what what does this mean for our business? What does it mean and how we're interacting with other women in business. If you're on a board, you can certainly learn some things about as that business grows, if you have female executives or a female leader, but also how again, it fits in with your wider diversity and inclusion policies, procurement being one of those key things, but also for women that are looking at potentially starting a business. It's such a great resource to say, it might be hard, but it's going to be hard anyway, whether you do it or don't, right, you'll either have unrealized ambition of I wish I would have started the business and I never did it because I was too scared or too worried about the outcome. That's a hard thing to swallow just as much as it is to start a business and slog through it. So use this research is really a I guess a bit of a launching pad, like I said, to really explore what's important to me. Also, knowing that growth is not everything. It's a perfectly valid decision to say, I want to have a business where I have lifestyle factors, I have autonomy, and it's right sized for my business, but make that an informed decision rather than something that you feel is forced on you because you just didn't get over that next hump of growth.

Helga Svendsen

That's great. And like I say, I'll definitely make sure there is a link to the report in the show notes so people can download it easily. Ah, thank you so much for the conversation today. There has been so much in there and I know people are going to want to go through the report, because we've only just touched on some of the things that are in there. So I encourage people to download the report, have a look through and maybe even get in touch with Jan, if you've got questions or queries about it.

Jan Easton

I'd welcome any contacts about it and it's clearly an area I love talking about. So I'll end this now so that you can wrap up your show.

Helga Svendsen

Well, thank you so much for spending your time and sharing some of those insights with the take on board community today.

Jan Easton

Thank you for having me. It's been a pleasure.