FDM Group in the Ascendancy

LSE listed FDM has enjoyed another excellent year as it continues relentless expansion into new territories and is the UK's leading graduate IT employer. We speak to Sheila Flavell, COO at FDM to find out how the company stays on top.

Tell us about FDM as a company and what makes it unique.

FDM is a UK-based international professional services provider focusing principally on IT and specialising in the recruitment, training and deployment of our own permanent IT Consultants across six core service areas: Development, Testing, Project Management Office (PMO), Data Analysis, Application Support and Infrastructure.

Our vision is to create and inspire exciting careers that shape our digital future. We are very selective and rigorous about who we hire, with a high barrier to entry. The FDM model is that we hire fresh graduates, ex-forces personnel and we now hire returners to work through our getting back to business programme. We bring them into the organisation and we train them up to a period of 16 weeks in our Academies. The training is free of charge and in return the consultants are bonded to us for two years. On completion of their training, FDM Consultants are deployed on client sites as full-time employees of the Group. FDM provide our 180+ clients with low-risk, value-based, business-critical IT solutions which are flexible and can be tailored to suit the varying requirements of their business.

We have kick-started over 8000 careers in the last 8 years and we see ourselves as a bridge between academia and the workplace. Even though we like to keep as many consultants as we can in FDM to pursue a career in our organisation, our business model is such that we offer our clients the opportunity to snap them up, and of course, our consultants are so fantastic that they do! This means clients will come back and invest in more FDM consultants so it's a win-win. We have past consultants who are now VPs and Directors of major

Sheila Flavell, COO of FDM Group

organisations. Every now and again, there are organisations trying to mimic or replicate the FDM programme and we take it as a compliment that they should admire our programme so much that they want to replicate it – we wish them good luck.

We are degree agnostic. For example, the consultant who was voted Consultant of the Year 2016 came from a music background. We don't just employ graduates from STEM or computer science degrees, we take graduates across a wide range of subject areas, ex-forces personnel and returners to work. Today, we recruit

from about 139 different universities and we have 62 different cultures, ethnic backgrounds and nationalities working for us here at FDM, we are a truly diverse organisation. As a company, we have grown organically and continue to do so, currently present and expanding in the UK and Ireland, mainland Europe, North America, South Africa and Australia.

How does it feel being a PLC now? Has it changed your role at all?

The main thing that has changed is our share price! When we listed on the 20th June 2014, the share price

was £2.87 and when I checked more recently, the share price was over £6.00, so we've seen healthy growth. FDM remains a fast-growing company and we are continually looking at new geographies that we can expand into. As COO, I look after the property portfolio of the organisation and the general operations. I'm also a marketer, so I oversee the marketing function on behalf of the board of directors. The operations department of the organisation is busy at the moment leading the expansion programme agreed by the board. We have recently opened new centres in Toronto, Virginia, Australia and refurbished in New York. We've also recently opened new centres in Hong Kong, Glasgow and Leeds whilst at the same time looking to expand our centre in Singapore and Frankfurt – so as you can see there is an awful lot of real estate work!

Have you always worked in IT?

I actually have a very diverse background as I started off as WPC247 in Glasgow City Police, this was a time when women didn't have equal pay. At FDM, everyone is equal, it's been that way since we set up the company. But back then, in the mid-seventies there were only a few women in the City Police. I was given the river, the fish market and the city mortuary. It wasn't very pleasant when we had to wear bicycle clips on our trouser legs to stop the rats running up them. But this was the seventies, the police force was very chauvinistic and they wanted to make a point that women couldn't do the same job as men. From the police force, I then moved to the Middle East where I stayed working for 12 years for an international airline.

How do we get more women into leadership roles across the sector?

The latest initiative that I'm spearheading is our 'Getting Back to Business Programme', focusing on helping people who have taken a career break back into work. Often those who have taken time out to have children or a career break are at middle management level. It is often challenging for them to come back into the workforce. If we don't get these women back in, post-childbearing, we certainly won't see them in senior

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management. We need these women to return to leadership roles, so that there will be role models for the younger women coming through. This is where employers have a role to play.

Employers need to look at more flexible working patterns. In larger organisations, technology is in fact enabling people to work from home and often employers are actually quite short of desk space so they are more than happy for people to work outside of the premises. If employers offer flexibility in addition to childcare arrangements, perhaps nurseries within the building itself, this will encourage more women to go back to work.

How is FDM helping women start their careers in IT?

I lead our 'Women in IT initiative'. After returning from the Middle East, I realised I'd spent my whole working life as a minority. I'd also suffered discrimination throughout my career but I didn't really recognise it as being discrimination. By the time I returned to the UK, I just considered it normal behaviour. But with three daughters all working in technology, I wanted them to have a much better start than I did, so I set up the initiative. Now 4 out of 5 women join FDM because of our commitment to diversity and we've moved our female workforce from 17% to 26%, a figure that is above average in IT. When I walk around any of our training centres, I can see women in every single one of our classrooms. It's very important to me and it's something we aim to continue.

We also have an ex-forces programme, led by Stewart Sharman from the British Army, and we're now at the point that we have approximately over 200 ex-forces personnel working for us on our client sites. A number have come from an engineering background and we also have ex-forces ladies that have joined us as well. They may not have experience in the commercial world but they come with experience of technology in the field and experience of life.

What do you think is blocking more women from entering IT?

When I was in New York, I addressed a number of professors from various universities and a few wanted me to look at their curriculum. They asked me "How can you get people into work and we can't? What are we doing wrong?" In my opinion, we need to have a curriculum that's fit for purpose for the workplace and this is something that we've pledged to develop with those universities. I believe it all starts with education and although the GCSE curriculum has changed, I still see it as a curriculum that's not female friendly.

This is why fewer girls are studying STEMs and it's a real problem. As girls progress through their education, the number pursuing a career in computer science actually diminishes. If we don't reach them at primary school, we won't get them to GCSE level. And if girls aren't getting to this level in technology, they won't get to higher education courses and universities. This means we certainly won't find them in the workplace, making our role at FDM and the role of other employers much more difficult.

However, I sit in restaurants and I see two year olds with their tablets, probably more well-versed in technology than their parents will ever be. The key influencers of young people are their parents and the teachers. We have to educate them so that they encourage young girls in particular to embrace a career in technology as there's never been a better time for young women to enter the sector than now.