

International Women's Day: interview with Sophie Leconte, CEO of everis Belgium

International Women's Day (March 8) is a global day celebrating the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women in many countries around the world. This day also marks a call to action for accelerating gender parity.

We had the pleasure of speaking to Sophie Leconte, partner and CEO of everis Belgium, to learn more about her experience as a successful professional in a consultancy firm specialised in digital transformation.

Can you briefly describe your professional career?

After ending my studies in a management business school in Paris, I started working in 1995 as a junior consultant for a company focused on strategy and operations consulting. For personal reasons, I then switched to working for another consulting company, still specialised in strategy and operations consulting, in South America. Due to the economic situation of Argentina at the time, I moved back to Spain and but kept on working for the same company. In 2004, I joined everis at the Barcelona office. I joined as a manager for business consultancy in industry and progressively became a partner in charge of the business consultancy unit in Barcelona. Two and a half years ago, I made the move to Brussels. The initial plan was to create the business consulting unit from scratch both for the public sector (particularly for European and international organisations), and for the private sector. Then, recently, I took over the role of CEO of everis Belgium.

What motivated you to reach a C-level position?

Rather than a clear objective from my early years as a professional, I would say that I envisaged this position progressively after taking successive challenges at everis. This allowed me to gradually develop my leadership skills and my level of responsibility, as well as looking at how some senior colleagues developed their career.

At everis, career paths are clearly defined and the company's culture invites you to gradually take more responsibilities and get more exposed. You rapidly feel that it is not good to "stay" in your comfort zone, but, that, in such a dynamic environment, you would better take any opportunity to develop new skills and accept new challenges. And of course, being part of a steadily growing company, you are offered more opportunities for career moves than in more conservative organisations.

What conditions made this evolution possible?

For me the first element is to work for an organisation that offers you a clear career path, and where you can feel that career management is considered seriously with a performance management system clearly communicated and applied with transparency. It is also key that your supervisor and your senior colleagues are committed to helping their team members improve their skills and progress in their career. At everis, part of our performance assessment as a supervisor depends on how well you coach and help your team

members to develop professionally. You will not be promoted to higher position unless you have prepared someone in your team to take yours.

The second aspect, as I already mentioned, is that working in a dynamic, growing company, you can reasonably expect more career opportunities. Career development does not only depend on your own performance as a professional, but also on seizing opportunities to get exposed to new professional challenges.

I received very savvy advice and support from some colleagues at different moments of my professional life, from both men and women that encouraged me to be ambitious professionally. I am really thankful for all these people today.

And what have you done yourself to be considered for such a position?

Whenever I felt I had my position under good control, I clearly communicated to my boss and to the organisation my willingness to take new challenges, to get more exposure. This point is especially relevant for women when you become a mother: you have to explicitly communicate your professional ambitions so that they are taken into account for promotions. In management positions, you are expected to show flexibility and availability, and this is unfortunately more difficult for mothers, especially with young children. This is where I think two key factors intervened in my case: first, my husband and I have equally shared the effort to take care after our girls and to run the house, and this has been definitely a significant help for my career development. Even so, I have to say it has been sometimes difficult and tense, when I had to travel or faced high peaks of workload and long working days. We had no family living close by, so we also had to spend a significant budget in children care and help at home, instead of spending it in leisure activities, at least the first years. Secondly, I showed a degree of flexibility for travelling and worked a lot on my personal organisation skills. I also tried to minimize internal meetings at late hours and did my best to make meetings more efficient whenever I could.

Can you recall any female or male role models that inspired you or motivated you to become a CEO (or others positions throughout your career)?

Certainly, and I think looking up to some senior women colleagues and learning from them nurtured my ambition even as a junior consultant. When all your senior colleagues are men, it makes it much more difficult for a woman to project herself to the next step in her career; at least in the same organisation.

My predecessor as CEO of everis Belgium was Els Blaton, and I am thankful to her for sharing her experience and training me to develop my skills for this role.

Considering that everis is a consultancy firm well positioned in the field of digital transformation, do you see any particular challenges for the company in terms of gender equality?

Indeed, we are facing a critical challenge. As most of our competitors in the digital field, we are facing difficulties to hire qualified professionals at the required pace. The digital industry, broadly speaking, is already facing huge scarcity of talent, and this will probably worsen in the next years. The number of unfulfilled vacancies for ICT professionals in Europe is expected to almost double to 756,000 by 2020. As Andrus Ansip, Vice President of the European Commission for the Digital Single Market mentioned last year: only around 16 % of the professionals employed in the ICT sector are women and their share of workforce is declining.

As a leading consultancy firm in the field, we cannot afford to lose any talented professional in the field and we are therefore committed to making the necessary effort to attract qualified women professionals to our company and provide an environment offering them the same opportunities to build their career as their male colleagues.

In a longer term view, it is important to attract women to the digital field. The everis Foundation has launched some initiatives in this sense, meeting teenagers in schools and supporting workshops around coding, robotics, or other digital-related activities. The Foundation is also running another initiative, programme Pulsar, which is aimed at reducing the gender gap. It offers a mentoring programme by successful female professionals for young women aged between 15 and 18 years.

What message would you like to convey to attract girls and young women to consultancy and jobs in the digital environment?

Actually, I would like to share several messages with girls and young women on this matters:

1. The digital world is not dry and boring. It is a field where creativity, problem-solving, interpersonal skills, language skills and team work are valued and will cover more and more relevance in the future.
2. Take time to explore the large and diverse range of professional options in the digital industry, talk to women professionals in the industry and ask them what they value and enjoy in their day to day working life.
3. Do not turn your back to one of the fastest growing industry, where career opportunities are and will be significant for the next ten years. This sector is also a springboard to other sectors, broadening your career opportunities with experience.

Based on your experiences, what kind of advice can you give to create a diverse and truly inclusive working environment?

Transparency and a clear model for professional development are fundamental: companies need to clearly explain the promotion mechanisms to their employees; salary grids must be transparent and clearly defined; feedback on your performance needs to be regularly organised.

The corporate culture has to support diversity. For example, **it is important that women professionals feel equally addressed as their male colleagues when they attend a top management presentation or corporate**

communication. It may imply a genuine review of the language used or behaviour codes favoured in the company.

At everis Belgium, there is a close follow-up of indicators tracking the share of women at each level of the company, among recruiting candidates, hiring rates, promotion rates, and all this benchmarked in the activity sector. For instance, at everis Belgium, 22% of the consultants, and 20 % of the managers and directors are women. So, we know that we have to increase this share. Lastly, in areas of the companies with very low rates of women and no female role model in management position, a mentoring programme by senior women professionals can be a big help.

On a final note, the advice that I would like to give to women and men is to foster their efficiency at work (meetings well organized and productive, efficient communication, autonomy in non-critical decision making, etc...). It is primordial to minimize unproductive time, extra-hours and flexibility.

Finally, companies need to allow women multiple speed career-development, especially in time. It is not because at some moment of your life you decided to slow down your professional progress, that you should not be able to be candidate to resume a fast career track a few years later.