

An accountant working for one of the world's major software companies might seem like a numbers overload. For Cathriona Hallahan FCCA, however, the key to success has always been people

NO SOFT OPTION

As a career aspiration, 'having fun' would seem, by universal agreement, to be a bit of a no-no. The working environment should be pleasant, of course, and who wouldn't look for a job that was satisfying and rewarding? But, even through the most rose-tinted spectacles, asking for the nine-to-five to amuse and entertain would seem to be an expectation too far.

So it is refreshing, indeed, to see an Irish businesswoman, high on the corporate ladder and with responsibility at global level, for whom it is a frontline goal. As her work profile will tell you, Cathriona Hallahan FCCA 'most of all, likes to have fun in both her professional and personal life'. Today, based in Dublin and managing director of Europe, Middle East & Africa (EMEA) Operations with Microsoft, Hallahan leads 600 full-time employees and 500 supporting contractors in an operation responsible for 140 countries. EMEA functions include customer care, supply chain, channel management, services, project management and order-to-cash processes of some 5.5 million transactions each year, not exactly a position with a lot of down-time factored in and, certainly, a long way from her first position as accounts clerk with the

software giant some 24-years ago.

Growing up in Stillorgan, Co Dublin, Hallahan was forced to confront some of life's harsher realities earlier on. Her father died when she was ten and, with two older brothers, college was out of the question for this bright school leaver because of the financial pressures it would put on the family. 'I didn't want to see my mother have to work indefinitely to put us all through education,' she reflects. 'None of us, in fact, went straight into college – we all studied after we started working'.

Salad days

Hallahan worked as an office clerk for two years before she answered an agency ad for an accounts clerk in a local newspaper. There was no great surprise when the employer was revealed to be Microsoft, largely because Hallahan had never heard of the company. The year was 1986 and the future software giant, which had set up in Ireland a few months earlier, had a staff of just 24 in Dublin.

It was, needless to say, still the very earliest days of personal computing. Microsoft, though a significant player, was nowhere near its prime, jostling with many long-forgotten competitors for its place in the computing sun. Though the

first release of Windows for MS DOS had already taken place, no one could predict the strides it would make in the coming decades.

Coming on board just in time for the official opening, Hallahan was also on hand to greet a young Bill Gates at the official opening of the Irish site. She remembers 'a very down-to-earth guy, clearly very smart and a little eccentric. His interpersonal skills wouldn't have been great. He wasn't a "let's go to the pub and have a pint" kind of guy. He would have been very highly strung and very highly motivated.'

The early days of Microsoft, Hallahan remembers with great affection. 'Our average age in the Dublin office was 19 to 20. It was a lot of young people having a lot of fun. There were weekends away, Friday nights going out together'.

Going global

Hallahan's progression, in the early stages, was largely tied up with being part of a company that was growing rapidly. 'In the early days, I would say I probably didn't have a vision. The company was nearly doubling in size every year, so the opportunities created themselves. I started as an accounts clerk, became an accounting supervisor, and went on to manage the finance

*ACCA AND ME

'I always had a very strong business acumen,' Cathriona Hallahan recalls. 'I ran the school shop and I was working outside of school from the age of 16.'

Add to this a flair for customer interaction, with maths as one of her best subjects, and becoming an accountant may have seemed inevitable. However, Hallahan credits her first manager in Microsoft with directing her towards ACCA. 'As a qualification for industry he thought that would be the ideal fit,' she remembers. Apprehensive about committing to study while working, Hallahan studied to be an accounting technician first. Coming tenth in Ireland in the exams made it clear she had the aptitude to go much further. To her surprise, when she finally got down

to studying for ACCA, it came to her quite naturally, she says. 'It was all very relevant to the job I was doing. I was working in finance and the curriculum actually helped me in my job.' Whereas others in her class were taking study leave of up to eight weeks, Hallahan got by on just a few days here and there, passing all her exams first time round. 'Being an accountant has given me a great basis on which to run my business,' she says. 'I'm very cost-focused, very measurement-focused, but I believe it is equally important to maintain a strong rapport with the customer. I really understand business value and how you drive a good dialogue around what the business has to achieve. A lot of that comes from the ACCA qualification.'

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department over my first ten years with Microsoft'.

Hallahan showed her ability to excel as a project manager and, with Dublin home to Microsoft EMEA Operations Centre (EOC), she was among the 'Irish cadre' of managers who proved there was something to sit up and take notice of, being instrumental in setting up the commission agent structure and moving to Nixdorf systems for all financials and manufacturing.

How her career would progress in the decade following this was, she reflects, also part of the story of how Ireland itself was evolving in significance for Microsoft. 'The one thing I would say that's constant about Microsoft is that it changes. We reinvent ourselves constantly. The company takes on big challenges but also believes in realising people's potential. I know that sounds like a bit of a naff HR phrase but it's very much part of the ethos, and I would say I'm a prime example of that.'

In 2001, Hallahan assumed responsibility for call centre and channel management in the EOC, a position that, just two years later, would transition into her first truly global role when she took responsibility for developing Microsoft's new Customer Partner Experience (CPE) strategy.

It is little secret, of course, that for all of Microsoft's extraordinary success, the company had suffered from a long-running public image problem, being the company that geeks love to hate

and one that the general public can find somewhat forbidding.

The CPE strategy was a concerted effort to turn around that image and, indeed, the current success of the 'I'm a PC and Windows 7 was my idea' ad campaign is perhaps the clearest evidence of how far it has progressed over the decade.

'Prior to 2000, we were all about technology in the company,' Hallahan says. 'There was a cultural breakthrough when we saw that there was no use in having all this technology if we didn't have customers who were going to use it. So we created the CPE strategy. It is now a core part of how we think, from our executive level down. How our executives are rewarded now includes a CPE element. So it's not just about revenue and market share, it's about the experience that customers have.'

Balancing

Hallahan reflects that key to her obtaining a global leadership role was the fact that the company has been open, over the last number of years, to appointing candidates from outside its US headquarters to such positions. Of course, the majority of the decision makers are still, by and large, US-based, 'so you have to spend a significant amount of time walking the corridors there, getting to know people and them getting to know you.' Such heavy investments of time naturally forms one of the great challenges that women,



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'YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE EVERYTHING TO EVERYONE. IT'S ABOUT GROWING A STRONG LEADERSHIP TEAM THAT CAN TAKE A LOT OF YOUR RESPONSIBILITY, AND NOT BEING AFRAID TO DELEGATE'

in particular, confront when taking on senior corporate roles – the work/life balance. With a ten-year-old daughter, Hallahan's observation is that 'it's about setting your boundaries and about what you're comfortable doing. You don't have to be everything to everyone. It's about growing a strong leadership team that can take a lot of your responsibility, and not being afraid to delegate. I have a very strong team who support me and I let them know what my boundaries are, what I'm prepared to do and what I'm not prepared to do'. Within Microsoft, Hallahan invests a lot of time coaching and mentoring, and became a qualified coach a number of years ago. She takes a direct role in running Microsoft's comprehensive diversity and inclusion programme, one that addresses multiculturalism, gender, accessibility and gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender. Surprisingly, one of the biggest challenges remains a marked reluctance among women to go for senior roles. Hallahan points to multiple Microsoft initiatives across the organisation to counter this, including networking seminars, International Women's Day events, a 'women in technology' group, the Senior Women@Microsoft series, and a diversity and inclusion week, all of which she is actively engaged in.

Location

In terms of Microsoft's positioning in Ireland, Hallahan points to a continuing redefinition of its role. 'One of the great things about Ireland is that the site here has reinvented itself significantly over the years and we're continually looking at ways to develop it and keep it relevant.'

She believes the development of the smart economy is 'really the way forward for the Irish economy and there's a great place for Microsoft in that'. The company is currently supporting start-up businesses with software and other resources and is also working with Government on a wide range of education initiatives.

While the recession has certainly had an impact, it hasn't affected employment significantly here and, she says, has helped people in the Dublin site to be more productive and innovative, with often very positive impacts on the internal environment, particularly in how people communicate with each other. In taking up the current role, one of the biggest challenges was, in fact, internal communications.

'The site had become somewhat disconnected. People were working in their own divisions, with no real connection. When I started, I got

hundreds of emails from employees who were excited about the possibility of becoming a more connected place and being part of a bigger identity.'

Credit for a job well done would seem to have come when Microsoft was voted the best place to work in Ireland last year and Hallahan was named the O2 Business Woman of the Year.

Looking to the future, she's certainly not settling for last year's achievements as her 'high-water mark'. 'I'm only in this job two years, there's more to be done,' she says. Nor does the greater responsibility impact on her desire to support others. Recently invited to take on the role of 'chair of chairs' for a new body, the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland, Hallahan is excited about contributing her expertise to help create an oversight and governance structure while, at the same time, gaining from the opportunity to learn about something totally new.

The stated aim on the CV may be to have fun but, underlying Hallahan's career progression to date, has been the ability to make a real difference among those around her. Indeed, it is the ability to powerfully associate the two that marks her out as a business figure of substance and, undoubtedly, one to watch in the coming decade.