DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE
KEYNOTE INTERVIEW

## 'Diversity is having the best thinking'

The FTSE 250's first Asian female chief executive tells **Catherine Hufton** why the UK needs a more inclusive workplace to succeed

uby McGregor-Smith was chief executive of Mitie Group plc, a strategic outsourcing company, and received a CBE for services to business and diversity in 2012. She was later nominated as a Conservative life peer by David Cameron in 2015.

Notable for being the first Asian female chief executive of any FTSE 100 or FTSE 250 company, she is now a non-executive board member of the Department of Education. This year she delivered The McGregor-Smith Review about workplace diversity.

## Why do so many businesses have a diversity problem?

"I think there are a range of reasons for the lack of diversity in business, but the big issue is around the pipeline coming through. This is driven by the way businesses recruits and the way they develop and train their talent. In the case of women, my review for the Government gives recommendations about how we can improve things, from flexible working to more support around childcare.

We found that even if women were getting to quite a senior level, when it came to starting a family, the lack of flexibility and financial support meant that many were dropping out of the workplace. I recall having expensive childcare when I had children to help me through, but I was in a job that allowed me to afford to pay for it. That is not the case for most people, so families face big challenges around the cost of living and childcare – that has tended to mean that women drop out of the workplace more than men."

## What are the benefits of a diverse workforce?

"Diversity is about thinking, it's not about whether you're black, or disabled or a woman – it's about having the best thinking around you, and that comes in every shape and size. You just don't see many BME [black and minority ethnicity] individuals at the top of business. I attracted attention because it was rare, and it shouldn't be rare. What



I got was too much attention because I looked a bit different and that, to me, was hugely sad. I just happened to have been born in India, and yet that seemed to be more interesting about me than anything else. It takes away from what you achieve if everyone just fixates on your race, and that's the problem – that's how we hire and recruit people. People don't like taking chances, they feel it's taking a gamble on hiring someone who looks different, or who is a girl, or BME. That's the bias that exists and needs to change in every industry."

What can be done to make a change? "A business could choose to take actions such as sending employees on unconscious bias training so that they actually understand their biases, or ensure their recruiters absolutely understand that they need to provide more diverse shortlists of candidates. To summarise, you need data; aspirational targets; to be honest about what works and what doesn't work; and be prepared to publish your data and say what you're going to do about it. Role models, mentors and sponsorship are also really important while we get equality in place. In my review, I've created a road map for organisations that advises what they need to aim for."

How can it help the economy?

"The benefits of a diverse workforce are huge. My race review shows that if there is equal representation of BME individuals in the UK, then there will be a £24bn-per-annum boost. This is why it's so important to drive business growth and development, but I think we're so over needing any more justification. Everyone should accept that of course it's better for the economy – there's so many reports

on it. What we need to do now is just

## How does someone from a minority find business success?

implement everyone's findings."

"My advice to anyone looking to succeed in business would be to find someone who can support you. Earlier in my career, I had two extraordinary chief executives who told me they would support me and help mentor me, which gave me confidence. It's also important to not look towards the top of business and think that they didn't have many of the same challenges as you."

