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GREEN

Finding talent in unusual places

Leander's blueprint could transfer to the boardroom, writes
Louisa Peacock

NICK Aitchison, the former chairman of Sir Steve Redgrave's rowing club, has big plans to shake-up the headhunting industry. Next month he will join search firm Hanson Green as a director and says the way in which his former club searches for and hires the best rowers could become the "blueprint" for UK boardrooms.

Of the 14 rowers at Henley's Leander Club who won medals at the Beijing 2008 Olympics, only five came through the traditional independent schools and university route, with the rest spotted in "unusual places", Mr Aitchison said.

Some were identified by the club as youngsters with potential from smaller regional rowing teams, while others were hired as gifted athletes from different sports, such as Debbie Flood, who was a Great Britain junior judo champion before taking up rowing.

Having spent three years running the Leander Club, Mr Aitchison says businesses – under Government pressure to increase the number of women on boards – could learn a thing or two from his club's flexible and open-minded approach to hiring.

Currently, just 12.5pc of board positions in the FTSE 100 are held by women, with ministers aiming to double this by 2015.

Mr Aitchison said: "Talent can be found in very unusual places – 11 of our Olympic medallist rowers came from completely non-traditional backgrounds.

"It was about being imaginative about where we looked – we knew we could bring in four or five people who had a proven reputation in a boat race. But we said we would bring in people with more to offer in the long-term."



As the Leander Club gears up for the Henley Regatta finals on Sunday, Nick Aitchison looks towards new challenges

He added: "This could be seen as a blueprint for business. The challenge for boards – and headhunters – is to have an open mind about where to find that talent and innovative ways to recruit it."

Mr Aitchison is no stranger to the recruitment sector. Before the Leander Club, which is this week competing at the Henley Regatta, he held managerial roles at search firm Russell Reynolds Associates and Stork & May, which provides career advice.

He returns to the sector having missed the "buzz and the chase" of recruitment, but this time has first-hand experience of "the importance of having the right board".

He is adamant, however, that all

appointments should be based on merit regardless of gender. Mandatory targets for the number of women on boards – a distant threat from the Government if not enough progress is made voluntarily – would be unworkable, he said.

But employers that went to a greater effort to attract a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences would end up getting one over on their competitors, he said.

"It's not a box-ticking exercise, but boards are more than aware of the need for good governance," he said.

Barriers still remain, such as there being a smaller number of suitable female candidates than men, and women being more "cautious" about becoming non-executive directors

(NED) – partly due to the risk to reputation, he said.

But boards could begin to overcome this by making the role "more attractive and more accessible," he said. "Companies need to make it clear what the role is going to be, and make people feel their contribution is really wanted," he said.

"Each board has got to look at each NED role and ask what it is they are trying to achieve and what is best for the business, rather than saying the ideal candidate would be someone who is the 'x' in company 'x', where the chances of finding women candidates would be less."

Mr Aitchison joins Hanson Green on July 18.