

Movers and Shakers: Charlotte Laurent-Ottomane, President, The InterOrganization Network

By Melissa J. Anderson (New York City)



“It’s been the driving mission of ION since our founding in 2006 to increase the number of women on public company boards and in the executive suite. One of the criteria for member organizations to join is that this must be part of their mission,” said Charlotte Laurent-Ottomane, President of the [InterOrganization Network](#) (ION).

ION is a consortium of 14 regional organizations in the United States, dedicated to the advancement of women to positions of power in the business world.

Laurent-Ottomane explained, “There has been a growing body of research showing the high correlation between gender diversity in the boardroom and the financial performance of the company.” She continued, “Women make up a huge portion of the workforce and the consumer market means it’s only natural that you have women on the board representing that audience.”

“And simply put, it just has to be that way. It’s the natural balance,” she added. “In this country, we’ve gone through many variations of equality. Now it’s women’s time to be equal, and that means equality in the economy and in the board room. That’s where the power lies.”

Equal Chance to Be Elected

Responding to criticism that a push for getting more women on boards is tantamount to tokenism, Laurent-Ottomane said, “A lot of women don’t want to be token. But if you’re not a qualified woman, we don’t want you there either.”

Advocating for women in the boardroom does not mean putting men at a disadvantage, she explained. It just means ensuring the best people for the job have the opportunity to be considered for it. “Of course we do want the best people for the job,” Laurent-Ottomane said. “But women can be the best people for the job too.”

She continued, “We need to look at a balanced spectrum of candidates, is what we’re pushing for.”

Money and Power

ION recently announced a new initiative to engage state treasurers and institutional investors in promoting gender diversity on boards. Laurent-Ottomane explained, “A gender diverse board is a more effective board.”

She continued, “We advocate that either the companies have a representation of women on the board or they have a gender diverse slate for new directors. The issue is not black or white or about a specific number or quota. Rather we encourage companies who are making the effort to change the status quo. Ideally, we would like to see a company strive for a ‘critical mass’ that is at least a 30 percent representation of women on the board or on the slate of directors for a shareholder vote.”



She continued, “This is all about money and power. The initiative is to say, ‘I will give you my money as an investor if you meet this criteria.’ It’s as simple as that.”

“It’s an excellent addition to the movement. Until a few years ago it didn’t have the power behind it. The influence of the mutual funds and treasurers gives the CEO and sitting boards cause for reflection.” Laurent-Ottomane also mentioned the SEC’s new diversity regulation, which requires companies to disclose what they are doing to increase boardroom diversity.

Influencing Decision Makers

One of ION’s goals is to help women connect and network, and encourage them that board service is something they can do. “We’re sometimes our own worst enemy, because it’s never even occurred to some women to serve on a board.”

Each of ION’s member organizations provides training and education for women on board responsibilities and self-advocacy at least once a quarter, Laurent-Ottomane said. “I as president have been very adamant about getting out there on this issue. And as an organization, we have grown to the point where we do have a voice.”

Laurent-Ottomane said that getting more women on boards has long been a personal mission. She recalled, “I spent a large part of my career in Paris with Alcatel-Lucent. And I was fortunate. I was in charge of financial communication spanning Europe and the US. It put me in a position to understand the importance of good governance.”

She continued, “I returned to the US in 2000, and eventually decided to leave Alcatel and start my own firm in Florida. And in 2007, I formed my own firm providing counsel to public companies on communications with institutional investors and shareholders.”

“When I moved to Florida, I wanted to connect with women like myself and joined a group called [Women’s Executive Leadership](#), and eventually was asked to join the board. Then I was asked to be our representative to the ION board. Then one year ago, I became president of ION,” she explained.

In her time as office, Laurent-Ottomane said, she has tried to drive ION as a business. And she’s also used her own business to advocate for putting women on boards – and she’s been successful, having recently convinced a client to place a woman on its board. “It’s all about synergy,” she said. “Increasing board diversity is all about good governance. My business is about financial communication and that includes governance. If I can help make a board better, I seize that opportunity!”