



**NORTHERN LIGHTS**

**RECOGNISING AND  
PROMOTING  
FEMALE TALENT**

---

**RESEARCH**

**Victoria Tomlinson**

**May 2015**

## RECOGNISING AND PROMOTING FEMALE TALENT

Two years ago I was invited by the BBC to be trained as one of their 'expert women', to comment on TV, radio and online about social media and business. This was in response to criticism that the media is dominated by men.

At the time, we had recently started doing business in the UAE and a number of people said 'We need that here. We need to raise the profile of women in the UAE'.

That set us on an interesting journey. We started researching whether women wanted a media profile – and in the process discovered some of the secrets of what they really wanted. They needed to make more impact in meetings and presentations; be recognised for their expertise and for their ideas to solve business and global problems.



It was clear that if women wanted a media profile, they pretty much knew how to do this. What so many didn't know was how to make more of an impact to be promoted, invited to speak or be appointed to board positions.

While we were beginning our conversations in the UAE, we also had a number of very senior women starting to work with us in the UK. The exchanges were remarkably similar, though often packaged slightly differently.

This report looks at the conversations we have had – with more than 1,000 senior women in both countries. I have been honoured to be a guest speaker at events ranging from the His Majesty's Ambassador's event for senior women at his residency in Abu Dhabi to HSBC's Women's Forum in Dubai to the International Business Women's Group and Eversheds' event in London for female General Counsel.

At all of these, women have shared their insights and interests.

I particularly want to thank a number of women who have encouraged and supported this initiative and helped shape our ideas: Lubna Qassim, Executive Vice President, Group General Counsel & Company Secretary of Emirates NBD – the largest banking group in the UAE; and our colleague, Vania Henry who is based in Abu Dhabi. Also clients and friends to our business: Jan Fletcher OBE, Elizabeth Jackson and Jane Hustwit.

With their help we have tested out and developed a number of programmes for senior women – and they have already seized more opportunities and made more of an impact.

Of course, we work with just as many male leaders as female – and for every woman saying she doesn't feel confident giving presentations, there are just as many men. But we are particularly looking at the female perspective because the facts speak for themselves.

Despite every effort, across the world women still only hold between 5% and 30% of executive

and non-executive positions. Just five female FTSE 100 chief executives and fewer than one in ten hold executive positions. And those numbers are reflected in the USA, in the UAE and wider afield.

Do we think that is because women don't have the skills? Few would say that these days. So what is happening? This research is our own small contribution to understanding more and offering some solutions.

We would love to discuss this further and hear your own stories and views. Please contact us at [victoria@northernlightspr.com](mailto:victoria@northernlightspr.com) or [vania@northernlightspr.com](mailto:vania@northernlightspr.com).

**Victoria Tomlinson**  
Chief executive, Northern Lights

## 1. UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S NEEDS

This project started with the idea of helping to 'raise the profile of women in the UAE', perhaps extending the BBC's own initiative to increase the number of women appearing in the media. We had the support of the BBC Academy and BBC Worldwide and were looking at working with the media and encouraging women to put themselves forward.

To test out how this would work we had conversations with

- A number of corporates, banks and oil and gas companies in the UAE who all had various initiatives to identify and support female talent. They shared where they felt the gaps were
- Eversheds kindly introduced us to a number of leading women, mostly Expats on management teams
- Business organisations such as the British Business Group and the ACCA similarly made introductions, including to female Emirati leaders

It quickly became clear that very few women were looking for a media profile. If they wanted one, they had already been media trained, there was plenty of support to do this in their organisations and they were taking up opportunities.

What women wanted was far more subtle. They talked about their experiences of being overlooked, having ideas they wanted to take to senior management but not knowing how, not wanting to be seen as pushy or vain but having steely ambitions. Some of the most ambitious were Emirati women.

We went back to the drawing board. Themes were emerging, could we help women in a different way?

With the help of a headhunter, a number of leaders and Lubna Qassim – men and women – we started shaping a programme.

We then started testing out the ideas, a respected organisation asked us to work with two female Emirati leaders and a number of women asked us to work with them individually.

Alongside this, Victoria was asked to speak on numerous occasions – particularly around using social media for thought leadership and LinkedIn for professionals – at events including Dubai Women's Council, CBD Now in Abu Dhabi, professional services groups and more.



By early 2015 we had met, heard the views of or worked with more than 1,000 women – and had a clear idea how to help women have impact, to be recognised and promoted.

Lubna Qassim invited Vania Henry and Victoria Tomlinson to present their findings at a private lunch she hosted for more than 60 of the UAE's most senior women. This report covers quotes from many of these women and our conclusions of how women can help themselves.

At the lunch, Lubna Qassim, who earlier this year was appointed by HH Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum – ruler of Dubai – to the Dubai Women's Establishment, summed up why this issue is so important.

She said: "I am determined to see more women in leadership roles. Sheikh Mohammed has decreed that he wants to see a woman on every board – so the willingness is there from the top, the issue is how we make it happen.

"When I met Victoria and Vania of Northern Lights, I felt they had something really different and a new perspective on what women need to do. Their thinking about personal brands immediately resonated with me. Too many women do a great job and expect others to know and appreciate them. That's not the way it goes.

"Women need to learn to promote themselves, but not in a brash way. I am sure that thought leadership blogging is one way to do this, retaining female authenticity yet demonstrating and engaging around their expertise."



## 2. THE KEY ISSUES

We did not set out for this project to be formal research. We were trying to understand needs to help shape our business in the UAE and UK. But a few consistent themes quickly started to emerge and we share these here.

### 2.1 Personal branding

Anyone who reaches a fairly senior position usually has a wealth of experience behind them. They may have spent their early career in HR in the oil and gas sector, moved into project management in a bank and now be looking at sustainability and consumer behaviours in energy consumption.

If they put all this into a LinkedIn profile, people can look 'Jill of all Trades'.

And this was what we realised was happening – a lot of women were either trying to explain everything that they had done in their career without any focus or weren't really telling their story in any way in any place.

*"I have been nominated for a global leadership position. It's a great honour, but I know the first thing the selection panel will do is look at my LinkedIn profile. I've just got the basics of my career in corporate life. There is nothing really reflecting the community projects I've set up around the world with great success, none of the media profile I have. How do I demonstrate my skills and experience?"*

*Director, global corporate*

*"I have really been thinking about what the government needs to do and how they could achieve some of their goals in half the time. But I haven't talked to my boss about these thoughts – or anyone really. Where do I start? I want to be on a global platform in ten years sharing and influencing. How do I do that?"*

*Emirati manager in government department*

Of course, all of this can apply to men. The biggest difference with women, we think, is that women worry about being seen as boastful if they position themselves professionally – and there is a tendency that if they are doing a great job, they expect others to know this without explaining it.



*“I want the leaders in our organisation to be recognised for specific areas of expertise. At the moment, they tend to tweet about everything – from a day out with their kids to a government conference. I want them following the big commentators on their issues – in the Guardian, New York Times, The Economist – and engage with them on Twitter. They need to marshal their thoughts and start blogging and get debates going. But first of all they have to be clear about their expertise and what it looks like and then how to use that as their personal brand.”*

*Chief executive, leading organisation*



*“In our culture, it is just not done for a woman to push herself forward. I know I am being noticed by some of the top people for the work we are doing – which is great and really important. I want to see our people recognised across the world and feel that I can help them to do that – but I don’t want to seem boastful if I put myself forward. Can you be recognised professionally but still be seen as a modest woman?”*

*Emirati leader*

## 2.2 Impact in meetings

A particular issue for Emirati women – but to a lesser extent for expats and those in Western cultures – is the conflict between wanting to have a presence in meetings without being thought too aggressive or self-important. Women said that as a result they tended to stay quiet in meetings, no-one got to know them or their expertise and they felt frustrated that they were being overlooked for promotions, speaking opportunities or board appointments.

*“I am a qualified accountant and know that the quality of my work is better than my two male colleagues. Yet one of them has just been promoted and I wasn’t even in the frame. I get overlooked for key projects when I know I can help our organisation make some key investment decisions far better than they are currently doing. How can I have a better presence in meetings?”*

*Emirati senior manager*

*“I was invited to join a really important government committee. There were about 20 of us round the table and I was the only woman. I just didn’t exist for most of the meeting and the chairman never looked my way. Because of the work you (Northern Lights) had done with me I had worked out my key messages before and suddenly came in and said ‘please, I would like to speak’. Everyone was shocked but I know what I said was really strong. Suddenly the chair was consulting me on every point and people came up to me afterwards to ask my views on other things – and I was invited to be a guest speaker!”*

*Emirati leader*

## 2.3 Being invited to speak at events

Even the most senior of women we spoke to didn’t really know how to go about getting speaking

opportunities. Some looked with envy at a few women they knew who had become recognised speakers and then invited onto government boards and the rest.

One or two asked how they did it – did they employ PR companies?!

## 2.4 Impact in presentations to governments and boards

Presentations worry most people, men or women. On the one hand women have an advantage over men in a presentation because (to generalise!!) they are easier to look at but on the other hand, women's voices don't have the strength and not that many women can create power in the way that a man can.

One chief exec told us that she wanted her senior leaders 'to own the stage'. If they are to be recognised leaders in their field, she said she wants them out and influencing businesses, government leaders and global gurus. This is a big step up from delivering a speech from 5 pages of typed notes.

But the impact from becoming a strong speaker is enormous. Most of the chief execs and directors we spoke to saw this as being one of the quickest and most effective ways to be recognised and invited to join the influencing conversations.

*"I really need help. I had to present to an international NGO recently; it was only five minutes but I was quaking. Everyone else was very academic and used really long words in their speeches and I don't know how to do that. I have got so much in my head that I need others to understand and in the end, I don't think they will have taken anything away from my talk. I am really frustrated."*  
Chief executive, international business

## 2.5 Using social media

This was the area least understood and with the most opportunity for women.

Yet few understand its power, its ability to deliver so many of the things they are worrying about – or how they can damage their reputation by doing the wrong things. Too often we found women putting pictures of their children on Twitter or Instagram; having chatty conversations about meeting for lunch; or sharing amusing viral videos.

Very often, it was a case of not knowing where to start, other times they just had not thought about what they were doing in social media or how others were viewing them.

And almost no-one had thought of social media as a search engine – and that if they wanted to be found as a speaker, they needed to understand keywords and include them in their profiles.

We believe blogs should be at the heart of positioning women as thought leaders and engaging with global commentators around their expertise – and that LinkedIn profiles should be at the heart of any leader's personal brand. We have been helping a lot of leaders in this field and the impact is an eye-opener.

*"I love the LinkedIn profile that you have created, but I needed time to get used to the person in it!"*



*It is me, but I initially felt embarrassed reading about this successful woman who has done so much and wants to change things. I can't believe that as soon as the new profile went live, I immediately had really interesting people contacting me. I didn't realise the power of LinkedIn at this professional level."*

*Director, global science business*

*"Creating a blog has been transformational in my thinking and a critical tool to influence others. I had a tendency to put down my thoughts in a fairly random way. But then Victoria would say 'so what' to all this?! What do I want someone to do as a result of reading my blog? It's all very well saying 'you haven't thought about this' but the blog then helps you to shape what boards should be doing and how to achieve that, recognising the challenges."*

*Pat Chapman-Pincher, FTSE non-exec, chairman and futurist*

## 2.6 Building influential relationships

The world of social media has changed how we influence others forever. Bloggers in a small study can now share their thoughts across the world, have discussions on Twitter with the gurus in their field and join debates on how we do business or govern.

However, few in business and government really understand how to build relationships with social media. Once, you would have had to sell your ideas to a publisher to get a book into print; do the media circus to promote your book and your ideas. Now you can do this through a blog or other social media.

A really critical skill is to understand how Google works and therefore how you can be found when people are searching for influencers and speakers. Getting found is the first step to starting a relationship which eventually leads to the influencing, speaking and appointments.

*"In the last few months I have shocked and changed the minds of nearly 200 business leaders. I have been trying to achieve this, one way and another, for some years – but until six months' ago I did not know how to shape my thoughts or have the tools to influence others. Now I do."*

*Pat Chapman-Pincher, FTSE non-exec, chairman and futurist*

### 3. WOMEN CAN HELP THEMSELVES

One of the most uplifting aspects of this research was that generally women were not complaining and blaming others. The conversations we had were about women working out how they achieved their ambitions. They were taking ownership themselves.

And bosses globally are trying to work out – how do we get more women into leadership positions. The will is there, no-one has all the answers. The good thing is that the debate has moved on from chief execs thinking they lose women because it is women who have the children. As a new generation of male leaders is emerging, who expect to share childcare, they can see the issues first-hand with their wives, daughters and sisters.

No-one has yet found a magic wand, but with real willingness and action from leaders and women themselves wanting to learn and achieve, perhaps things will change in the next decade?

When Victoria spoke at Qiyadiyat – a group of bright, ambitious women leaders in their 30s and 40s from the UAE – women talked about helping their sisters. Many admitted they could not negotiate for themselves, but could happily and successfully do this for female colleagues.

There is recognition that women need to support others. While most of those currently in leadership positions have got there themselves without female role models or helping hands from sisters – it is clear there are not enough women who have worked out how to do this. The pace of change is too slow.

No woman wants tokenism. What everyone wants is for the good women to be recognised and appointed, with confidence, to the roles where they can contribute to business, government and society.



## 4. CASE STUDY – PAT CHAPMAN-PINCHER

We feel enormously privileged that so many women have shared their thoughts, frustrations and ambitions – but for obvious reasons they have to remain confidential.

However, we have been working with a FTSE non-executive director for the last six months in all the areas we have discussed – personal branding, using social media, creating a thought leadership campaign and blogging.

Pat Chapman-Pincher recently wrote a blog around how this has worked from her perspective and here we share her own thoughts below. This was written for PrimeWomen's website in the USA.

### How you can influence business leaders – as an individual?

In the last few months I have shocked and changed the minds of nearly 200 business leaders. I have been trying to achieve this, one way and another, for some years – but until six months' ago I did not know how to shape my thoughts or have the tools to influence others.

Now I do.

In this blog I want to share with you what I have learnt, done and achieved in the last few months along with the ideas as to how you can also influence others.

First, let me explain what I have been worrying about and why I wanted to change minds – then I'll cover the 'how to' of all this.

I have spent my career in, and leading, technology businesses; my specialism is strategy and having a knack for predicting what the future will look like. Sometimes I have been ahead of my time – such as when I told one of the world's largest telecom providers that there would be one million people walking around with mobile phones in five years. They just didn't believe me, but of course it not only came true but very, very much faster than I predicted!

For some time now I have been worried that companies are automating at a phenomenal rate and no-one at board level is really thinking through what the impact is going to be for their companies or society. There will be huge swathes of jobs wiped out – not just junior jobs but also middle management and professional jobs. To say nothing of the impact on profit structures and the disappearance of some industries as we know them – such as logistics with the rapid arrival of driverless cars.



So I have been bumbling along, worrying about all this. I had given a few guest speeches which had very good feedback, but I don't really think achieved the impact I needed.

Then I went on Twitter to see if that would get me there. Victoria Tomlinson, who used to sit on a board with me, spotted my Twitter attempts and started helping me. When she realised what I was trying to achieve, she said very briskly 'you need to become a thought leader'!

So now I am doing this and here are the six steps that have helped me make that leap.

### Clarify your thinking

Strangely, this was the hardest part, to condense my thinking into a few key points. I had too much going on in my head and there was no clear message. Victoria kept pushing me: why was this important; where was the evidence; what did boards need to do; what was stopping them; what should they be doing?

I knew the problems but I hadn't got to thinking about who had to do what to make things change – or how I could help them. As much as anything this has helped me position myself in my own head.

### Credibility for your arguments

The next step was to create credibility. It is no good going off and speaking to the world at large – they will want to know, who are you and why do you know what you are talking about?

So we have created a personal brand for me. To be honest, at first I felt uncomfortable about a lot of it – despite my sitting on a FTSE board and chairing other boards. Seeing yourself packaged professionally can seem boastful. Which is ridiculous I know!

My 'brand' explains succinctly what I have done, gives stories and examples of my career and presents my expertise. It has formed the basis of my LinkedIn profile, other social media profiles and biographies.

### Setting up a blog

Creating a blog has been transformational in my thinking and a critical tool to influence others.

I had a tendency to put down my thoughts in a fairly random way. But then Victoria would say 'so what' to all this?! What do I want someone to do as a result of reading my blog?

It's all very well saying 'you haven't thought about this' but the blog then helps you to shape what boards should be doing and how to achieve that, recognising the challenges.

I post some of these blogs on my LinkedIn profile – the one I wrote in response to Vint Cerf's comments about how we save photos, was viewed by more than 600 people.

LinkedIn has helped me get in touch and start conversations with a number of old and new contacts.

## Researching a white paper

We have decided that I will write a white paper to structure my thinking and produce a template for boards as to what they should be doing.

As I already have senior contacts, Victoria suggested I should ask them for a coffee – using this blog, [Does your leadership team understand the true impact of intelligent technology?](#) to explain what I wanted to discuss. Directors have been delighted to meet – and the answer to whether they are thinking about the business impact is ‘no’.

One partner at a global professional services firm said yes, they are automating widely – back-office and more. When I asked who was looking at the impact on the thousands of graduate recruits a year, she just looked at me. ‘No, we haven’t looked at that’.

## Guest speaking with a purpose

I am now feeling confident about how to shape my thinking and offered myself as a guest speaker to an event for some of the UK’s most senior women. And Victoria is also now promoting me as a speaker – later this week I will be at [Claridge’s](#) speaking to nearly 100 leaders of FTSE businesses.

I thought I had the speech sorted, but when we looked at it from a director’s viewpoint, Victoria did not believe the message was going to hit home and she was right. So now we have created a ‘walk through’. I get the audience to shut their eyes and project forward ten years, then walk with me into the street and down the road. As we look at shops without staff, delivery vans without drivers and a medical centre without doctors, the message starts to hit home.

And the feedback from my first talk with this technique was amazing. Yes, I had shocked the directors and most important, they were now thinking about what to do in their businesses. This had impact.

## Media coverage

The next step will be to finish my research and write the white paper. I will then talk to key journalists, with the help of Victoria’s business, [Northern Lights](#) – and use social media. So what has this thought leadership campaign done?

Well in just six months it has already helped me to engage with nearly 200 directors and to make a difference. I now have some rudimentary tools – particularly LinkedIn and the blog – to do this. The most useful part has been to clear my thinking – especially the what, why and how of it all. Working with a partner means I know they are watching my back to ensure things look professional and they make a dull speech sparkle and a blog come to life for the reader.

I suspect many of you will have thoughts as to what needs to change in our society – now social media means we have a practical way to do this.

*[Pat Chapman-Pincher](#) is a CEO mentor, international speaker, strategist and futurist with a portfolio of technology non-executive directorships*

## 5. IN CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Leadership communications and executive presence

Leaders tell us there are three key areas that will help them to be recognised internally and externally, be promoted and win board appointments

- Personal branding – being clear about your expertise, identifying a niche with added value, understanding the ingredients of your brand and how you can use it for impact; creating a LinkedIn profile to showcase your skills and win business/speaking opportunities
- Impact in meetings and presentations – are you clear about the goals for your presentations and meetings; how to plan to achieve these; how to engage your audience and the use of storytelling
- Thought leadership – how do you influence others and position yourself as a leader; speaking, facilitating and moderating at events; how to win board positions; using social media – particularly strategic blogs – to become a recognised leader

### 5.2 How can Northern Lights help?

As a result of these conversations, Northern Lights has developed a number of services to help women position themselves to gain recognition and promotion.

Although negotiation skills came up time and again as a critical factor, these are already included in management and leadership development programmes that are already available. So we have not included these for the moment.

What we have developed is a unique combination of support for leaders which combines our own experiences of how we got to board positions ourselves; our research around what women want and our communications and social media skills.

We would love to discuss this further and hear your own stories and views. Please contact us at [victoria@northernlightspr.com](mailto:victoria@northernlightspr.com) or [vania@northernlightspr.com](mailto:vania@northernlightspr.com).

## 6. PROFILES

### Victoria Tomlinson

Victoria Tomlinson is founder and chief executive of Northern Lights PR, which operates in the UK and the UAE. A former director of Ernst & Young, Victoria is a dynamic businesswoman with expertise in public, private and voluntary sectors. She was last year trained by the **BBC Academy** to be one of 100 BBC 'expert women' – her expertise is in social media, business and education. This is a response to criticism that the UK media does not have enough female expert commentators.

In the last two years she has given talks to around 3,000 business leaders at events ranging from conferences for 200 people to workshops for boards of corporates.

Author of a number of ebooks on social media, the most recent ([How to Write a Top-ranked Business Blog](#)) has been an Amazon bestseller.

Northern Lights' clients in the UAE have included the law firm Eversheds, accountancy firm PwC, Byrne Equipment Rental, FGB, Emirates Foundation and Strawberries & Cream as well as individuals.

Victoria is chair of the Advisory Board of the University of Leeds Management Division and on the board of Northern Ballet. She was previously a board member of Bradford University School of Management, which runs an MBA programme in the UAE.

She lived in Saudi Arabia for two years when younger; has worked in Kuwait and Bahrain when with the banknote printing company Bradbury Wilkinson (now De la Rue); and travelled extensively in the Middle East and Africa. She has driven with family across Saudi Arabia and from Saudi Arabia to the UK and has long had a passion for the Arab culture. She reads and speaks basic Arabic.



### Vania Henry

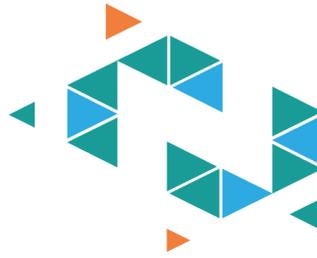
Vania Henry is a multilingual marketing and communications executive with 15+ years of international experience in business and marketing management positions.

Vania was a director at PwC in Luxembourg and the Middle East, where she headed up internal communications and social media for the Middle East, as well as looking after PwC's Academy in the UAE. She was a member of the steering committee for the regional Women in Business initiative and has been guest speaker at a number of high profile events in the UAE. Vania is also chair of the BeNeLux business council, connecting Belgium, The Netherlands and Luxembourg to Abu Dhabi & the UAE.

Before she joined the UAE office, Vania was running the Marketing & Communications department of PwC in Luxembourg and prior to that, she held positions at DuPont, De Beers, a concert hall and a media group.



Vania is passionate about brand and customer service. She firmly believes in the importance of good communications to deliver messages with impact. Her outstanding interpersonal and communication skills have enabled her to build a proven leadership track record in a multicultural environment. Vania speaks English, French, German, Luxembourgish and Italian, as well as some basic Arabic.



# NORTHERN LIGHTS

Northern Lights is a multi-award winning communications consultancy and a leading digital and social media specialist, which operates in the UK and the UAE.

We have a strong 25-year track record Northern Lights of helping corporates, public sector organisations and SME's to create strategies and deliver communications that achieve success.

Expertise includes content marketing, media relations, media training, social media strategies, crisis communications and leadership skills

Particular skills are in PR, media, marketing, communications and digital and we cover:

- Content Marketing
- Communications Strategy and Implementation
- Business Relationships Management
- Social Media
- Crisis Communications
- Press Relations and Copywriting
- Internal Communications
- Stakeholder Engagement
- Writing / Managing Blogs

## Head office:

Northern Lights

The Coach House, Harrogate, HG1 2PY

Tel +44 (0)1423 562400

Vania Henry mobile +971 (0)50 41 50 751

Victoria Tomlinson mobile (UAE) +971 (0)50 67 87 229  
(UK) +44 (0)780 168 6132

Email [victoria@northernlightspr.com](mailto:victoria@northernlightspr.com) / [vania@northernlightspr.com](mailto:vania@northernlightspr.com)

Twitter @nlightspr Skype northern.lights.pr

[www.northernlightspr.com](http://www.northernlightspr.com)



Northern Lights is a member of the Gateway Group of Companies in the UAE

[www.northernlightspr.com](http://www.northernlightspr.com)