**Breaking the glass ceiling**

REPORT FROM THE U.S.—Starting in sales and marketing, a “stereotypical profession for a woman in the industry,” Lara Latture said entering the operational side of the hotel business was merely a fluke.

“When I started (in the industry) 20 years ago, you rarely saw a female in the roles that we all aspire to now,” said the executive VP and principal of The Hotel Group, which is why Latture still laughs about her inspirational climb up the corporate ladder. “Strangely enough we had an opening for a GM, and I was asked if I could take it on temporarily. I always kind of laugh. It was really a fluke.”

Fifteen years since that fluke, Latture is overseeing operations for the same company. “You didn’t see (women) leaders of hospitality companies (back then),” she said. “You didn’t see a lot of females (in general). You don’t see a tremendous (number) of us,” but the tide is turning, she said.

After speaking to a student at a hospitality school recently, for example, Latture noted the majority of graduates were female.

**Blazing the trail**

While great strides continue to be made for women, there still is room for the hotel industry to evolve.

According to the 2011 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Current Population survey for gender occupational data, women comprise 52.4% of hotel managers. “Fortunately, the industry has evolved. Unfortunately, it has not evolved fast enough,” said Christie Hicks of Starwood Sales Organization.


“Increasingly, more women are taking on leadership roles and making significant contributions to companies, as well as the industry overall,” Hicks said. “Many women leaders have already broken the glass ceiling.”

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**Fielding challenges**

There are challenges in any industry, said the women interviewed for this report, but those challenges often lead to a stronger female workforce.

“Are there days when people don’t take me seriously? Absolutely,” said Latture, a finalist in the Nashville Business Journal’s “2012 Women of Influence” awards program that honors influential and inspirational women in Middle Tennessee. “I’ve had a couple obstacles to overcome. You can’t be timid, and you can’t allow emotions or feelings to get in the way when you know the right answer and you know what you can do.”

“Fortunately, the industry has evolved,” Hicks said. “But, she acknowledged, women also must do both of those things. "Women comprise 52.4% of hotel managers, which includes GMs, assistant GMs, department heads and supervisors; women also make up 53.5% of the accommodation sector workforce. The National Employment Matrix shows 1.76 million accommodation workers in the U.S., 941,065 of which are women."

"When everyone in the room looks the same, opportunities and good ideas can be overlooked,” said Christie Hicks, senior VP of Starwood Sales Organization, who started her career 27 years ago as a sales secretary.

Surrounding herself with “great mentors who helped me avoid real problems but pushed me to always look for the next opportunity and encouraged continued growth,” Hicks was able to reach her goals early on.

“Don’t let the numbers stop you,” Latture advised. “You have to be quick and a decision-maker. Be someone that can make a decision, and 90% of the time you know it’s going to be the right decision.”

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Nancy Johnson started Women in Lodging in 2003, women in the workforce have seen the benefits on a national and state level in the U.S., said Kathryn Potter, senior VP of marketing and communications for the AH&LA.

"It’s a tough industry; it’s such a 24/7 industry," she said. "If you look at Jennifer Fox (president at Fairmont Hotels & Resorts), Kathleen Taylor (CEO of Four Seasons), Niki Leondakis (president of Kimpton), Stephanie Sonnabend (CEO and president of Sonesta International Hotels Corporation), we’re growing by leaps and bounds, and we’re headed in the right direction," Potter said.

Since she was 12 years old, Haack knew she wanted to be in the hotel business. "I didn’t know exactly what that was going to take the shape and form as, but I knew I wanted to be in hospitality. And I knew I wanted to be the boss," she said.

Focusing on being fulfilled both professionally and personally, Haack said she has found harmony between her work and home life. "There are sacrifices everywhere, but this is a wonderful industry and everyday you get the opportunity to affect people’s lives."

“For me, it’s the best of both worlds,” Haack continued. "I’m able to use that soft side because I have a desire to please, but I can couple that with a strong business strategy that gets me excited. I can’t imagine any other career that makes me do both of those things.”