

# Directing THE FUTURE



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**MAURA QUINN**, Chief Executive of the Institute of Directors, reflects on her time as Head of UNICEF Ireland and talks about her new role and the future for directors in Ireland.

MAURA QUINN, Chief Executive of the Institute of Directors (IoD), is on a mission. When she took up her role at the Head of the IoD in April 2008 having spent 11 years with UNICEF Ireland, she was faced with a situation where Ireland's corporate reputation was in tatters and an environment where corporate governance was quietly pushed to one side by the few who managed to do untold reputational damage to the country's image.

The last two years have been challenging for Quinn, but she brought form with her in dealing with crisis. When she joined UNICEF Ireland in 1996, she says that she found an

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organisation on its knees. “There wasn't a single part of the organisation that didn't need to be fixed,” she claims. “However, when I took the role, I was very impressed by UNICEF, especially from what I knew of the organisation internationally and I felt I had the skillset at the time to turn it around; I took the job on that basis.”

Having spent more than a decade with UNICEF, Quinn felt the time was right for her to move on in March 2008. “While I had an extraordinary 11 years with UNICEF, I got to the stage about one year before I left where I was getting bored,” she says. “I felt I had taken the organisation to a level where there was no more challenge left for me personally and professionally. I could have stayed on until I retired or I had the option to work with UNICEF internationally, but I felt that I had done all I could do with the organisation. I am a great believer in people not staying in roles once they reach a certain level of comfort; I think it's good for everyone involved to see a change of leadership.”

There is little doubt that Quinn left UNICEF Ireland in a much better state than how she

found it. She, along with her team, developed very sophisticated direct mailing techniques and built up a large body of supporters. When Quinn remembers her time there, she says she takes with her very fond memories, but notes that the organisation will have to continue to work for every donated cent. “I'm still a huge supporter of UNICEF,” she insists. “However, there are big challenges ahead for all organisations in what is a very difficult environment, particularly for those who are seeking voluntary support. The Irish Government is still a very big supporter of UNICEF so it may not be hurting as badly as other voluntary organisations, but I know from experience that it is always a constant battle to keep convincing people to donate because everyone is looking very carefully at where their money is going these days.”

If Quinn's time at UNICEF Ireland has taught her anything in business, it is that the skillset that she brought to her role and the skills she acquired whilst there, can be easily transferred. When she took up her post at the IoD, many people who knew her felt that she was taking on a completely different role. “There are quite

distinct differences in terms of the business of both organisations, but when you are Chief Executive of any company or organisation, the same skillset is required," she says. "You have to ensure that the bottom line is healthy, you have to ensure that the organisation is well run, that you meet all the governance and regulatory requirements, and that you have a good team around you who are empowered to do a good job."

Having settled into her new post, Quinn is now setting about growing the organisation and introducing new training programmes to improve the understanding of the importance of corporate governance among company directors in Ireland. "When I joined the Institute of Directors, we had roughly 920 members," she recalls. "We are now at almost 1,400, which demonstrates very significant growth in what has been a very difficult business environment. We did lose some members but our net membership gain has been better than our overall loss and we are seeing growth again this year. I am very conscious of the fact that when our members are making decisions about renewing their subscriptions that they know they are getting great value for money from the IoD. If they are planning on making cuts in their own businesses, it is my job to ensure their membership of this organisation is not on the list."

#### REPAIRING THE DAMAGE

As the membership grows hand-in-hand with a more general awareness of what good corporate governance entails, Quinn is adamant that more needs to be done to repair the colossal damage caused by the misdemeanors of a few. "There has been huge reputational damage done to the image of directors in Ireland," she explains. "Our reputation is at a low ebb internationally so we have a lot of work to do. We need to take the improvement of our corporate governance standards very seriously and we at the IoD are very clear about what our objectives are and how we need to go about improving the standards of corporate governance in Ireland. We approached the National Standards Authority last year with the view that a code of evaluation on a company's corporate governance should be introduced. Our thinking was that corporate governance could be independently assessed so that the results were not simply published in an annual report without any form of external assessment whatsoever."

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"As a result, there was a large working group formed over the past year representing different sectors (These included the Institute of Public Administration, the Corporate Governance Association of Ireland and some large PLCs). All of these bodies came together and launched Swift 3000:2010 in March earlier this year. Swift 3000:2010 is the Code of Practice for Corporate Governance Assessment in Ireland, is the first of its kind in the EU, and the first to award certification to companies that meet the required standard. At the moment, the detail of Swift 3000 is being put in place and the first independent assessments should be carried out in the autumn of this year."

#### GOOD FOR BUSINESS

Changes to how corporate governance is evaluated will ultimately be good for business, claims Quinn. She points to the fact that when levels of corporate governance were poor, the business involved inevitably suffered. The

introduction of Swift 3000, of which the IoD were a major driving force, will help businesses to come out the other side of the downturn. Despite a difficult outlook, however, Quinn is confident that the economic environment will improve. In fact, she points to signs that things are on the up already. "This year is very different than last year," she says. "In 2009, a lot of businesses were very frightened; there was a lot of paralysis around. Businesses were waiting for the Government to take control; they knew they were in for a rough time and in many cases, had to cut costs and/or reduce the number of employees or introduce pay cuts. This year however, whilst things are still very difficult, I sense that there is almost a war-like approach and businesspeople are just getting on with it. We have all made very tough decisions in the past 18 months and while we are not out of the woods yet, we have witnessed a slight bounce in consumer confidence. I think this is down to people being flexible; businesses seemed to change mode very quickly, which is a very positive sign for the future."

Indeed, along with a changing business environment, senior executives in large corporate companies, as well as Irish SMEs, are changing the way they think and the way they do business. In 2008, the IoD introduced the Chartered Director Programme to facilitate the training requirements of new directors or those that may not have had an official qualification whilst holding a directing role. "We found that some people accepted invitations to become directors of companies without realising the responsibilities that goes with the job. These people may have grown into the role over time but they did not have any professional knowledge. Similarly, we have come across people who became directors of small businesses that had no infrastructure behind them. Again, many of these people did not realise the legal responsibilities of becoming a company director, which is why we introduced the Chartered Director Programme two years ago. It has quickly become the most senior qualification a director can have."



Maura Quinn, Chief Executive, Institute of Directors