

## Interview with Elena Alemanno Deputy Country Manager IKEA Italia



### What has been your career path at Ikea?

I started working at IKEA in the Sales – Lighting department immediately after university, in the IKEA store in Torino, at that time under construction. I knew I had a lot of theory in my mind, but didn't know how to do anything concretely. After a few years I became Operations Manager in Turin and later in Milan. I tried to use the knowledge gained at university and combine it with my passion for numbers.

In 1996 I was promoted Project Leader for the IKEA store in Bologna, which opened in 1997. This was a way to work fully on the processes of a point of sale and to start transferring my knowledge to others. I then worked in Milan as Country Business Controller for 3 years. It was the first time I had the opportunity to understand the business from a 'country- perspective' and therefore from a wider point of view.

In 2000 I became Store Manager in Corsico (Milan) and after few years I was promoted Project Leader and then Store Manager of the new Corsico store. Corsico was at that time the fifth largest IKEA store in the world by sales volume. During this experience I had the opportunity to contribute to the development of the business and of people. After this incredible adventure, I worked as CFO IKEA Italy for three years, finding myself outside my 'comfort zone' due to the international dimension of the role. Later on I became Deputy Country Manager, an important role that brings together all of my previous experiences.

### Is passion for work a crucial factor in your opinion?

For me, passion is definitely a key element, my energy's driving force. Passion is what keeps you from feeling tired and helps you get up each morning with the desire to go to work.

**The European Union is making important steps in the direction of ensuring equality of opportunity between men and women. However, there is a strong differentiation between the various European countries. Do you think that the problem exists in Italy?**

Yes, I believe that this problem exists in Italy. It's an issue that has its causes in the culture in which we grew up and in the role our society imposes upon women. The good news is that, even while living in Italy, a company like IKEA, whose values spring from the Swedish culture, offers the chance to experience equal opportunities.

**The Italian Parliament approved few years ago the law on Boards of Directors' 'quote rosa'. This 'bipartisan' bill requires that, starting 2012, the Boards of Directors of listed and public companies must be composed for one-fifth of women. In 2015, the 'quote rosa' will have to increase to one-third for each board. Is the introduction of these legal obligations useful and sufficient or it is necessary to work on the Italians' cultural attitude?**

In Sweden it was precisely thanks to the introduction of these kinds of legal obligations that, in the early 70s, a significant change in culture began. I personally do not like 'quote rosa', because I prefer to be hired for my abilities/qualities and not simply because I am a woman, but I think that as a start 'quote rosa' can work. Things will really change when the richness of diversity will be fully appreciated by everyone: diversity - of gender, age, competence, etc. - adds value. This is not a case of being better or worse than someone else, simply that variety always makes a contribution, complements and improves.



**The Scandinavian countries have traditionally shown great sensitivity and open-mindedness towards equality of rights between the sexes; in Norway, for example, listed companies are obliged to ensure the entry of women on their boards of directors since 2006. Have you encountered this attitude in your professional experience?**

Yes, as I mentioned before, my experience at IKEA has always been very positive. The best thing though is that I never felt judged or rewarded or neglected because I am a woman. I always felt like an individual, free to be who I am.

**Is motherhood a problem for Italian businesswomen in Italy? How did you experience motherhood from a professional point of view?**

I must admit that becoming a mother and having a career is very exhausting. It takes so much energy and determination,

together with the ability to deal with constant feelings of guilt (you never feel like you're in the right place at the right time). I was lucky enough to have been a mother twice and this didn't have any negative repercussions on my career. It was more a case of me having had concerns than anything else: I will always remember how tense I was when I had to tell my boss that I was pregnant again, but he instantly got up from his chair, embraced me and told me that it was the best thing that could ever happen to me. Besides being an incredible personal experience itself, being a mother has allowed me to develop my leadership skills: patience, perseverance, listening and trusting others and delegating.

**In the Italian labour market is the female role model based on appearance or on substance?**

I have no experience outside IKEA. In IKEA the only thing that counts is substance, but in Italy female role models are mostly based on appearances, as you can see in the Italian media.

**Can the 'quote rosa' mechanism be a better guarantee of quality in the decisions of a company?**

I think that it would be better if we could guarantee a more equitable distribution of 'quote rosa' in middle management roles, because these are the leaders in contact with the majority of a company's employees. A fundamental issue, of role models and their leadership, remains: if women in managerial positions only imitate men, then the situation could also be worse.

**Germany has relied on 'moral suasion' than on legislation to convince companies to increase voluntarily the number of women in key roles. Do you believe that Italian companies are mature enough for voluntary action to work or does legislation remain the most appropriate instrument in our country?**

As I said before, I believe that during this first phase of change, we definitely need regulation, from which a change in our culture can and must begin (e.g. the introduction of mandatory 'parental leave').

**What are your favorite sports and can sport be an important factor in a person's professional career?**

I played basketball for 20 years and stopped only when I was pregnant with my first child. This sport has given me so much: the ability to work toward objectives, determination, sense of sacrifice, hard work, stress management, trust in others, perseverance, competitiveness, ability to take advantage of each person's strengths, teamwork, ability to do different things at the same time.

I have to admit that when I played I had not conceptualised all this, but over time I realised how much basketball has been instrumental in my career, so I'm really happy that both of my children have decided to play this sport.

**What advice would you give to a woman seeking to engage in the current Italian labour market?**

Try to find a job where you are accepted for who you are and have faith in yourself. Do not make any compromise for your career, follow your passions, be curious, be always on the move, enjoy the different moments of life. In a nutshell: try to be the best person you can be!

