

PHILIPPA FOSTER BACK, OF THE
INSTITUTE OF BUSINESS ETHICS,
TALKS TO JULIA BERRIS.

Holding to account

PHOTOGRAPHER: ROGER HARRIS

For the Director of the Institute of Business Ethics (IBE), the working day begins at 7.30am and ends whenever the work is done.

Philippa Foster Back's top priority is to ensure that the charity is running smoothly and all members are satisfied with the services it provides – a work ethic that does not always fit well with conventional working hours.

She says: "I have to say I don't always comply with the EU directive. I get in early and if there is work that needs to be done I will stay until it is finished. I think I manage my time quite well, though I do need to be organised."

Working more than a 48-hour week is demanding, perhaps more so as Foster Back's time is split between a variety of functions and responsibilities.

As well as being Director of the IBE, Foster Back has a variety of non-executive roles, including being on the board and working with the audit committee of the Ministry of Defence (MoD). She is also on the board of the Institute of Directors and is a member of its professional accreditation committee. "I am also the Chairman of a charity called the United Kingdom and Antarctica Heritage Trust. And I sit as a non-executive on my brother's company, which develops natural animal healthcare products. It is a very innovative company that works with new technology in this area."

Foster Back is dedicated to maintaining her diverse career in a range of positions and feels that this benefits her day-to-day work at the IBE.

She says: "I see my work at the IBE as my day job. I have responsibilities for the staff and but also for delivering the strategic view. My role is very much a co-ordinating role, an ambassadorial role, and a running role."

The IBE was set up in 1986 as part of the Christian Association of Business Executives. It is dedicated to promoting good business ethics in corporates across the UK.

Institute of Business Ethics (IBE)

The IBE was established in 1986 to encourage businesses to adopt high standards in business ethics.

Originally, the IBE operated as a fund within the Christian Association of Business Executives (CABE), but received separate charitable status in 2000.

Today, the charity works closely with a wide range of corporates to ensure they have a strong code of business ethics, which has been imbedded into the culture of the whole organisation.

IBE Director Philippa Foster Back believes that the organisation's charity status allows it to be completely unbiased and dedicated totally to providing support and advice to its members.

The IBE has a number of training courses, publishes a range of publications, and carries out research into the area of business ethics.

Since it was founded 20 years ago, the institute has published more than 20 books on business ethics and conducted surveys on the use of codes in businesses.

The charity hosts around 30 events a year, with a mix of open and private discussion groups.

Quarterly discussion meetings are attended by 15 to 20 of the largest UK corporates. This private meeting provides a safe and protected forum for corporates to discuss ethical issues that have been important to them.

www.ibe.org.uk

BEST PRACTICE AWARENESS Foster Back says: "Our charitable aim is to raise awareness of best practice in the field of business ethics. This is important because there is nowhere for companies to hide when it comes to ethical issues.

"If they don't behave well and do business responsibly and don't interact with stakeholders in the proper way, they are going to be held accountable."

The IBE advises and assists companies in understanding how to approach business ethics in a practical and effective way.

Foster Back explains: "There is a very wide range of stakeholders now. This makes it hard for companies to know how to approach this in a co-ordinated way across the whole company.

"A code of business ethics can be a form of guidance for staff. Every person from the latest recruit to the most senior board member should know how business is done in that company."

The IBE employs six people in total who all contribute to the wide range of services that the institute offers to its members.

As well as running training courses and quarterly corporate discussion groups, the IBE produces a range of publications and actively assists companies to set up a code of ethics.

Foster Back says: "The business may already have a code, so we may help them to revise this. We don't write them because each company is different and the code needs to be based on that company's core values, but we do have an illustrative guide for those starting from scratch.

"We also help develop strategies for embedding the message on how to train others."

After graduating from University College London with a degree in geography, Foster Back pursued a career in finance, working both in banking and corporate treasury.



CHANGING PLANS She says: "I joined Citibank on the corporate banking side after university. In order to understand the corporate needs with a view to taking that knowledge back to banking, I went to work for Bowater in 1979."

Bowater, now consumer packaging group Rexam, was a diverse company that encouraged Foster Back to remain in the corporate environment rather than sticking to her original plan and making a return to banking.

She says: "I enjoyed working at Bowater so much that I decided not to go back. Bowater was a conglomerate in those days. It had many different types of businesses with lots of aspects to it. For instance, it owned a merchant bank in Singapore, a leather manufacturer in Germany as well as the range of different paper products for which it was best known."

Foster Back's interest in business began at a young age. Growing up she watched her father fulfil a successful career in manufacturing. This encouraged her to follow a similar career path.

She explains: "My father worked in the manufacturing side of business and I have always been interested in that type of creativity. I find it much easier to work with a tangible product rather than intangible money."

Foster Back left Bowater in 1988 as Group Treasurer. During her time there she became heavily involved with the ACT.

She says: "My boss at Bowater, Geoffrey Jones, was one of the founding fathers of the ACT. Geoffrey encouraged me to get involved with the education committee. As a result of that I helped with the manual updates and the rest is history."

In 1999 Foster Back became president of the ACT for two years. During her time as president she made good friends and developed her hunger for a career that included much more than working for just one organisation.

She says: "I find it fascinating to be involved with loads of different things. Having been in the ACT and having had the wonderful opportunity to be President, I have reached a certain level which I think makes one attractive to other organisations."

STAYING FOCUSED "It has been great to develop a parallel career outside of my main responsibilities. It is important to stay focused on the wider business issues and I believe you lose that edge if you remain too specific."

In 1988 Foster Back joined training company DC Gardner as Group Finance Director. She then moved to consumer electronics company Thorn EMI in 1993 and was Group Treasurer until 2000.

With a wealth of banking and corporate experience Foster Back

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enjoys providing corporates with the benefit of her knowledge via the IBE.

She says: "Working with the ACT and working here has taught me so much. It is about bringing people of a certain peer group together. It is about sharing ideas, making the world a better place and helping people via education."

The IBE takes its responsibilities to its members very seriously. Quarterly corporate discussion groups are held where corporates can discuss ethical issues that have been a challenge and how to overcome them.

Foster Back says: "These meetings include 15 to 20 corporates, discussing really meaty issues. It is a safe environment for them to be able to discuss these things. The trust that we have built up is very important and we jealously guard that on behalf of the corporates."

Foster Back has been involved in many aspects of banking and corporate treasury.

Her diverse range of non-executive positions and work done at the IBE creates a rich career which is very rewarding.

She says: "I find the work that I do at other organisations feeds into what I do here. I believe that I benefit from doing several different things. You learn something from every different organisation. I feel very lucky to be given these opportunities."

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