



**Leading Women podcast
Commonwealth Bank Women in Focus**

Episode 6: Sian Lewis on career sequencing, the power of transferable skills and making brave calls

**Hosted by: Shadé Zahrai
Interviewee: Sian Lewis**

Featuring: Jinny Olney, Head of Women in Focus, CommBank

This episode, Shadé Zahrai interviews Sian Lewis. Sian is the Group Executive Human Resources of Commonwealth Bank. She was also the Founding Director of Way Forward, General Manager of Westpac, Director of Atos Consulting, Director of Change and Program Management of KPMG and UK Service Manager of Bupa.

Jinny [00:00:03] Welcome to Leading Women, your place to share and celebrate real stories and access the tools and resources you need to activate your leadership. I'm Jinny Olney, Head of CommBank's Women in Focus. And Leading Women is just one of the ways we support women at all stages of their business journey. So no matter where you are on your journey, we are here. Enjoy this episode as we redefine the business landscape together.

Shadé [00:00:32] Welcome to Leading Women, the place to ignite your leadership and elevate equality. I'm your host, Shadé Zahrai. And in our conversation today, we look back on the vital clues of corporate leadership in driving us beyond the new normal to reimagine connection, collaboration and innovation. In today's conversation, our guest, Sian Lewis, Group Executive Human Resources at CommBank, shares the opportunity of career sequencing and the power of transferable skills, making brave calls and backing your decisions. Thanks for joining us on Leading Women, Sian, dialing in from Sydney.

Sian [00:01:16] My pleasure, Shadé, it's lovely to see you and lovely to be here.

Shadé [00:01:18] Well, I can't wait to dive in. So, Sian, we would love to start with your incredibly intrepid leadership journey and the experiences that you've had both sides of corporate leadership.

Sian [00:01:27] Well, I'm not sure how intrepid it is but certainly I didn't expect to be ending up working in a bank on the other side of the world when I grew up in the U.K. But it's been an enormously privileged ride through the corporate world, starting as a graduate trainee, a brewery. I think there were two women in leadership. There was me as a graduate trainee and the head of marketing and then working through HR roles, moving into line management, leading customer service roles, consultancy, and then over to Australia and my kind of third career in banking. But something nicely circular about ending up back in HR as I currently am.

Shadé [00:02:11] You've had such broad experience across such a broad range of industries, different types of roles. You would have seen so much and experienced so much across it all. So, Sian, I'm going to go straight into the

burning question that I'm sure is on everyone's mind as we have you in the hot seat. Can you speak to the stories that we hear day in, day out of the death of the office, in your experience at the front line of reboarding an entire organisation? What are your thoughts on the death of the office and our next normal when it comes to our environment at work?

Sian [00:02:40] Well, I think the death of the office has been a little exaggerated. So, you know, I think we have to remember that we didn't organise work this way because we didn't like it. You know, it's been a long time since the Industrial Revolution meant that we all had to gather around big machines. And yet we have chosen to work in office spaces and in places where we can join with each other. And I think particularly as we look forward to the increasingly the types of work that human beings are going to be doing, a lot of the kind of more menial, more repetitive tasks are going to be automated, digitised, and we won't have to do them. The things that human beings are going to need to focus on are really complex problems. They're bringing their knowledge and their skills together, but no one person has the answer. So I think the office will change in the way that we've perceived it. It isn't going to be a place to go so that your units of time can be measured and managed. It's actually going to be a place you go because you want to be with other people. They've done a lot of research as we've gone through the pandemic about Zoom and you get the same kind of anxiety and performance nerves that you get if you're going to a meeting face-to-face, but you don't get any of the endorphins that you get from being with other people. And so while it's a fantastic piece of technology and I thank the Lord for it during the pandemic because it was, it helped us to keep the Bank going when we couldn't bring people into the office. I think people have to think very carefully about their own personal need for connection. Where do they get their energy from and how do they make sure that they keep that energy level topped up because working at home can be a very isolating experience. So I think the first purpose, if you like, the new purpose for the office, is going to be connection. The second is collaboration. I think downloading information is great in Zoom or Teams or, you know, other technologies like that, but genuine collaboration where you have to work on complex problems together. It's very hard to do that, you know, maybe I'm just not as tech savvy as the generations following me but I think you'd have to get very good at using the tools to substitute for three or four people being in a room with a whiteboard, really with the same basis of fact, to be able to really work through a tricky problem. And that is one of the things that human beings in the future are going to have to do increasingly. And then I think finally innovation; there are so many stories about how innovation doesn't happen in a linear way. Most innovations occur because someone goes, oh, that's really interesting, let's go and explore that. And that can happen as you meet each other in an office kitchen or you're working together on collaboration and something sparked the interests of one or two or three people. So I think connection, collaboration, innovation will mean that the office is still a very important part of all of our working lives, albeit I think we've learnt an enormous amount from our ability to work remotely. And there are certainly tasks I've taken to writing and reading my board papers more at home that's the kind of task you want to put your head down and be in a space where you can focus. And I think it's great that we've now proved that we can have that much greater degree of flexibility and choice. But yes, I think the office is going to be here for some time to come.

Shadé [00:05:58] And it's a good point you raise about the fact that it's really going to be up to each individual to determine where they need to be, where they work best, and for organisations to find that balance. And to your point,

we are social creatures. As humans, we have a need to belong and feel like we're part of something. You mentioned actually in the chat we were having earlier, isolation is a suboptimal outcome. We thrive when we're together.

Sian [00:06:22] That's right, we do thrive when we're together. I think from a perspective of us making choices, I think you need to start with your customer. What does my customer expect of me? Then, think about your team. What does my team need from me? And then think about you and your life. What do I need to do? And I think that there is a sweet spot in all of that, given the evidence we've gained about how effective you can be remotely but also how you can weave in those interaction points and actually being on site with people.

Shadé [00:06:50] So Sian, we're seeing an increase with many Australians who are taking up a sea change or a tree change and using this opportunity to get out, how might that shape the next normal?

Sian [00:07:01] Yes, I think that's really interesting. And if we come back to the point about connection, I think you need to make some really good decisions about the level of connection and collaboration that you need in the workplace. I think it certainly does, you know, a hour long or hour and a half long commute may be unacceptable when you have to do it every day of the week, but it may become acceptable if you only do it two or three days a week. I think the risk of the, you know, I'm off to Byron Bay and I'll see you once a month is something that people have to really think about, because I think we have had somebody very successfully working for us for some time who's based in Albury, and he gets the plane and he flies up when he needs to be in the office. But he's done that regularly. And that's a commitment that he's made to his family, is we're going to stay where we want to bring our children up and where we have family links. But that means that two or three nights a week, I'm actually going to be living away from home so that he can do the necessary connection. And then he actually works in the branch on the days that he doesn't come into the office. So I think you need to think about what's right for the organisation and the connection I need with my customers and my team and then also your own preferences in terms of lifestyle. So I think precipitous decisions are probably not the ones to be making as the new normal settles down but I certainly think you can contemplate longer travelling times because it's almost certain that there won't be the same five days a week, nine to five commuting demanded of most knowledge workers.

Shadé [00:08:29] So, Sian, in your area of expertise and really diverse experience, you would have seen first-hand how smart risk taking pays off when it comes to flexible work arrangements. Can you share with us the insider tips that you have around navigating a new era where virtual meets physical environments and where flexible work is the norm?

Sian [00:08:49] Sure, I think it's interesting to reflect that. You know, even when I first started in HR 25 years ago, we were talking about multiple careers. The gig economy has now become the kind of catchword for that as we move forward. And it's been a little bit slower in coming than we had perhaps expected. But, you know, my own experience, I think, rather than, you know, the ethos of the 70s and 80s, was that we could have it all. We could, you know, support our families. We could do full time work. And we could do that in parallel. There's a lot more evidence, certainly from my own personal experience now to suggest that sequencing is probably a better way to think about your career. Although we on average start work a little bit later than previous generations, we're probably going to

stay at work for longer. And so we have plenty of time to kind of ebb and flow our career as we move through various stages. So a very good friend of mine, for example, her partner at university decided to have children very early, didn't go to work for kind of five years post university while her husband was at work, then got a role and within two or three years that role gave her an opportunity to go overseas and they swapped. So the husband stopped working so that they could look after the family when they went on an overseas adventure. And she's now been in HR director roles for a number of years. So while probably she needed to get her head around that first five years of seeing some of her contemporaries, you know, start on the career ladder, it worked for them equally. I've got other friends who've left having a family to later or have decided to take a couple of years out and do something completely different. I think what you need to remember is that if you have the skill set, then actually you'll have it in two years time or a year's time or whatever it is, when you decide to rejoin the workforce. [00:10:40] Certainly my career has not been linear. I've taken sideways moves on at least four occasions in my career, and that's largely because I was always looking for something that added to my skill set and my flexibility, rather than looking for the next rung on the ladder or the next title or salary bump. And I think that's useful to think about as well because transferable skills are incredibly important and if you can build those up over time in the experiences you're building, you leave yourself with many more options when it comes to your next career step. [34.6s] The watch for anybody who takes time off from work and I include, you know, men and women in this, is that re-entry can be a bit of a challenge. You have to remember that if you've been away while you have all these great skills and abilities, you are a year less experienced than the people you left behind who have been at work and have been working for five days a week. And so you just have to adjust your expectations a little bit. I think organisations absolutely should be looking at potential as well as previous performance. And I think sometimes we fail to do that and have asked people to go back and kind of reprove their capability. I think organisations need to get much better at recognising that people keep those skills. But I think that when you re-enter, you also have to recognise that, you know, you need to build your networks again. You need to pick up on the rhythm of the organisation because it's a little bit the French expression, everything changes, but nothing changes. You may re-enter the workforce and think like all seems very familiar and same people but actually there will be subtle differences if you've been away for a year or two years and it just, you know, just takes a little bit of time to re-orientate yourself around the organisation, around the work you're doing. And remember that, you know, if you do a great job, then this is just another piece of time for you to get back into it and start then to aim at what you want to do next. I think it's important to make really mindful choices. I think the worst possible outcome is to make a choice, for example, to stay at home or to, you know, travel around the world for a year and then come back and be resentful about the fact that you haven't progressed as fast as some of your peers in your career or even worse, stay in an organisation or stay at work and then look back in five years and think, God, I really wish I'd taken that opportunity to, you know, get my coaching diploma, sail around the world, spend the year before my kids went to school with them. You know, whatever it is, everyone will be different. Obviously, a lot of our ability to take time off also is around how you work that as a family unit. And certainly the best at sequencing their careers tend to be in the Nordic countries, where access to paid childcare and equal access to both paternal and maternal leave and pay means that it's a much easier decision for family units of any variety to make decisions about how you swap that work and home scenario. But I think there's enough flexibility with remote working now that we've just been talking about, with the fact that people are much more open to the fact that careers are not linear and you'll have multiple different experiences to really think about what's right for you now rather than I have to stay

here, otherwise, you know, I won't progress in my career. I think that's something that we can kind of hopefully let go of in our mind.

Shadé [00:14:08] And I really appreciate this very pragmatic approach that you have to it because it makes absolute sense. And you actually shared something with us when we were talking offline. You said you have to be really clear about the compromises that you're willing to make based on what you're prioritising at the time. Did you have any guidance around that, especially for women who might be earlier on in their journey, who are in a rush, you know, move as fast as they can, get ahead as quick as they can, what guidance or advice would you give to women who are at that stage?

Sian [00:14:40] Take a deep breath. It's a marathon, not a sprint. You're going to be working for a very long time. There is no career path, lots of people say, oh, how do you build a career? And there is no ideal path. Certainly I wouldn't have designed my journey to get to this end point. But I think if I take one of the examples from my own career, I was just about to do my partnership assessment at a consulting firm and got the opportunity to move to Australia. And, you know, my partner and I sat down and talked about it and we said, no, that seems like a really bad idea. I've worked so hard just about to become a partner. We were settled in the UK and over the weekend we kept revisiting the conversation. And in the end we said, you know, we're not sure; maybe we should toss a coin. And so we would toss the coin about whether we'd stay in the UK or come to Australia. And we said, okay, heads will go to Australia. And it came up tails and we said, okay, best of three. So clearly we wanted the adventure and it was the rational parts of our minds that were thinking about staying in London. And so we did, we decamped and came to Australia. And I have to say that first six months was very tough. New organisation and I'd be lying if there weren't moments when I didn't think, what have I done, what have I given up in order to, you know, start again, really in Australia? And I just had to keep reminding myself that there was no parallel Sian Lewis leading a better life in London and that actually once we'd committed to the decision, then let's give it a good go. And so we always said I will just come for two years because we'll do two years. And then if it works out, it doesn't work out or we're not happy, then we'll go back. And if I was good enough to be partner two years ago, then I should be good enough to be partner when we returned. And here we are in Australia 20 years later. So I think, you know, I'm making some brave calls that might not be linear but then committing to your decision because there isn't a parallel. So if you're at home, make the most of being at home and love the time you're going to be spending with your family. And don't worry or regret or think about the things you might have been doing at work or likewise, if you decide to stay at work, then, you know, make the necessary arrangements. Your family is going to be fine and stop worrying about the fact that you haven't made the choice to be there at teatime. I think mindful choices that you really commit to and then commit to maximising, knowing that you can always change, as we did when we came to Australia. It's a 24-hour flight or before the pandemic, it was a 24-hour flight. And we could always have gone home had things not worked out. And I think that's the same. I think I want to commit to staying at home and lots of mothers then find six or nine months in that actually they really miss the stimulation. I think don't feel guilty about that and find a way of even if it's not a return to corporate life or full-time work, find a way of getting that right balance for you and then commit long enough to see if it will work for you. And if it doesn't, adjust again.

Shadé [00:17:51] It's such a refreshing way of looking at it, too, because to your point, you make a decision, you commit to it. You know that that's what you've prioritised. But you're not stuck there. You don't continually compare yourself to everything else and think, oh, gosh, I've made the wrong decision. But then you get to a point where you say, you know what, this isn't for me. I'm going to take action again, make a mindful choice and do something that is aligned with where I want to go. Sian, we're often asked in Leading Women about the differences and the similarities between male dominated industries and roles and more female dominated industries and roles. From your experience and your viewpoint, what are your views on why women tend to advance in industries like HR and marketing?

Sian [00:18:31] I think the starting place has got to be they've been gendered by happenstance, not because there are any innate abilities in men or women that make them particularly suited. I went to a mixed secondary school and then went to a single sex high school. And as I move to the single sex high school to do what would be the HSC here in Australia, I couldn't believe that there were women who were doing chemistry and were going to go to Oxford to study chemistry and physics because in my secondary school, not cool for a girl to put a hand up and be good at chemistry. Now that clearly is just gendered rubbish that we need to get over. So let's start on the basis that there is no role that is exclusively fitted to a man or a woman. Secondly, though, I think because of this gendering that we've had, I think women have tended to see themselves as more creative, more empathetic, using those softer skills and therefore HR, marketing, PR, those kinds of careers have seemed to fit the skills that we are stereotypically given. But if I think about my own career, I actually started as a graduate in a brewery because I had no idea what I wanted to do. But I like the idea that, you know, I'd be working for an organisation that actually made something, produced something, and I ran a pub for a while that's not a typically female job. And so, you know, you're able to actually step in and talk people down where if I'd sent male bar staff in, it would have taken the police to stop things. So you learn a lot, you know, funny, but, you know, apposite example where you can really use the stereotypical female skills to get a better outcome than you would necessarily get with the kind of harder, more assertive skills. When I was in HR, I really liked the coaching and supporting of people to make great decisions, to help and support people. But I did think about my credibility in building a career in that when I'd never actually led people. And so that's what made me move and move to an organisation where I could get to lead people. And I went from managing three personal assistants, I think, to managing a team of 85, running a contact centre. Now, that's a big leap. But again, I found the transferable skills I had made that actually easier, perhaps, than I had anticipated. But what it also gave me was real exposure to customers. And that's a, you know, it's one of my frustrations is that fewer women in banking, for example, will lean towards front line roles in business banking or retail banking, and I think that's where a lot of great, if you've got great listening skills and great empathy, then your ability to understand the customer and deliver great outcomes for them while contributing directly to a P&L makes a real difference. It's frustrating for me that there are so many bright women who are limiting the ability potentially for them to get to CEO positions in big corporates because they've never driven P&L functions. And I think, you know, it's very difficult to say you're credible at very senior levels if you've never really had to live by the, you know, in banking the balance sheet or the P&L in consumer goods because that means you've never really been that close to the customer and you've never seen the real output of your efforts in understanding need and delivering to need. So I think for women thinking about taking those skills and putting them into areas that are not as stereotypically female, I think is incredibly powerful. And, you know, having stepped into a contact centre role when I came into banking, I was then able to step into business banking

because some of the service delivery model was via a contact centre. So, you know, you pick up little bits of skills and abilities as you move through your various career stages and you can apply them across the whole range. There's a lot of talk about STEM subjects at the moment, and I think that's very important, but not because I think women necessarily are going to move into engineering roles, although I'd love them to in greater numbers. But I think the reality is the executive of the future is going to have to be highly data literate. Whatever function you're in, you're going to have to have a really good understanding of technology and not just how to use the interface that's built for you, but how the whole mechanics and the infrastructure works behind that, because it's very difficult to make decisions in a modern organisation that is so dependent on both of those things if you haven't got a good aptitude for them. So I think whether you see yourself going into a STEM area or not, I think maintaining a focus on, you know, maths and the hard sciences is going to be important for everybody.

Shadé [00:23:19] Absolutely and I love how you highlighted that using these stereotypical feminine skills that we tend to identify with, we can leverage those to actually reach better outcomes in more traditionally male spaces. It's just about recognising the transferable skills that we're developing, taking them with us and to your point, not placing limits on what we think we can and cannot do because we are the first limit that we have, you know, whatever is going in in our mind that holds us back.

Sian [00:23:47] That's right.

Shadé [00:23:47] And so I love this pragmatic view that you have around, you know, don't let your environment dictate what you're going to do. Be conscious about, you know, what do you want to feel? What gaps do you have and where do you want your career to ultimately end up? So, Sian, as you know, at Leading Women, we are committed to activating women's leadership. Our unique impact is that each amazing guest offers a tangible tool that's ignited their leadership for us to add into our Leadership Toolbox to elevate equality and redefine our business landscape. What are you adding for us today?

Sian [00:24:18] You know, I've given this some thought, it is quite tough, isn't it, in terms of a toolbox. It's tough for two reasons. One because some things become habitual for you and you don't realise they'd be valuable. And secondly, you know, who am I to give other people hints? You know, we're all just trying to find our own way through our lives and our careers. But I guess one thing that may not be obvious, because it's not directly connected to work. I am a big gratitude person. I spend quite a lot of time reflecting on the things I've got rather than the things that I haven't got. And what I found is by counting my lucky stars on a pretty regular basis then it actually makes me quite resilient. So during the really tough times when I've had situations either in my career or beyond where I thought, wow, this is feeling really hard, I find just counting the blessings I got born in the 20th century. I got born in a country that gave me a great education. I got born with parents who encouraged me to get educated and didn't put limits on my ability. I've got to live in multiple countries and do multiple things. It's difficult to really feel that you can't handle the next crisis when you actually start to reflect on the great opportunities you've been given and certainly that's helped me keep some perspective when times get a bit sticky.

Shadé [00:25:39] Beautiful, a wonderful piece for us to add into the toolbox. Thank you so much, Sian. What an incredibly impactful conversation, especially in the context of everything that we're all navigating right now, the very pragmatic view that you have around taking control of your career, knowing what you're compromising, but being okay with that and taking really mindful choices and then ultimately being grateful for what we have. Thank you so much for your time.

Sian [00:26:04] It's lovely to speak to you.

Shadé [00:26:10] What a thought provoking conversation, especially in the context of how career sequencing, transferable skills and flexible work environments are shaping our next normal. We're looking forward to you joining us next episode. So until then, share this episode with the women leaders you know and let's activate leadership together.

Jinny [00:26:31] Thanks for listening to Leading Women where we can all activate leadership and redefine the business landscape. So now it's over to you, access the links, tips and tools discussed in this episode at womeninfocus.com.au and subscribe to Leading Women so you don't miss an episode. Leave a review. Spread the word. And let's commit to keeping the conversation going at [#leadingwomensaus](https://twitter.com/leadingwomensaus)