

Kluwer International Tax Blog

Diversity in Tax Panels: not a Nice to Have, but a Need to Have!

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“Oh, I was so happy when I was told you were in the panel!” It is always nice that someone is pleased with your presence, but this surprised me a bit. The OECD employee who made this confession had only just met me in the taxi that would bring us to the conference. Seeing my puzzled face, she explained that in 2018, the OECD issued guidelines that ask employees to only accept invitations for conference panels that include at least one female speaker.[1]

On an even wider scale and in line with the fifth United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal of Gender Equality, the [UN Global Compact Panel Pledge](#) was established in 2016. This is a global effort to help ending all-male panels (also referred to as ‘manels’). UN staff members were called on to pledge not to take part in or to host panels comprised only of men. To take the pledge global, the UN Global Compact encouraged its 68 Local Networks and over 12,000 companies around the world to make their own pledges to bring gender balance to conferences and events. In addition, they were asked to share their commitment via Twitter at #PanelPledge.

Why strive for gender balance?

International organisations take such actions for good reason. Manels, for example, [may not recognize unconscious biases, lead to tunnel vision, neglect certain topics and perspectives, and confirm stereotypes](#). Guidelines such as the OECD’s and pledges advocated by the UN help raising awareness of congress organisers, funders of seminars, and other speakers. Therefore, they go beyond the individual employee or company taking the pledge. In addition to gender balance, other factors, such as a balance in the cultural background of speakers, are important to make sure that panels are not just inclusive by the looks of it, but also by the outcomes they generate.

Let’s talk about tax

Tax seminars with only white male speakers are not unheard of. In my experience, this is usually not by malicious intent, but more because of habit (inviting the people in your own circle) and unawareness of the drawbacks of such manels. I have the feeling that especially the more internationally oriented part of the private tax sector is aware of this issue and tries to avoid organising manels, but that awareness might be less in the public sector, which includes universities. This might also have to do with differences in generations. It seems that younger

women and men are more aware of the importance of diversity for obtaining the best results.

As manels are still not uncommon in my own country, the Netherlands, I tried to raise awareness in the way that suits me best: by writing an [article](#) about it. International colleagues pointed out to me that manels are not just an issue in Dutch tax seminars. For that reason, this guest blog does not only want to raise the awareness of the international tax world, but also provide tips to help making tax manels extinct species in the near future.

What can we do about it?

The elimination of manels is a joint responsibility of conference organisers, speakers, providers of financial and human resources, and women. Therefore, I give some simple tips for each of these groups. These suggestions are not very original, but they are effective.

Organizers

Everything starts with conference organizers as they select the speakers. My advice to organizers who do not know any female experts on a topic: consult a female colleague, someone outside your own network. And also: if a woman says ‘no’, do not give up, but ask her to suggest another female expert and, more importantly, keep looking. The [common excuse](#) that you tried, but women were unavailable will just not do. And please note diversity also means not always asking the *same* women (and men)!

To enhance speaker diversity, it may help to try the ‘paper proposal’ model, instead of the ‘invited speakers’ model that is customary in continental European tax conferences. The paper proposal model is regularly used in other academic fields, but also, for example, in the yearly [UK/Irish Tax Research Network conference](#). It allows anyone to submit a paper proposal. The best proposals are selected for the conference. In the [2019 Lund GREIT conference on Tax Sustainability in an EU and International Context](#) we tried this model. As is evidenced by the [conference book](#), this resulted in a diverse and high-quality group of speakers with usual and unusual suspects. They approached the subject from various angles that were in some cases also not expected by us. [Mateusz Lewandowski](#), for example, spoke at the conference about tax policy measures to counteract energy poverty, a concept that was rather unknown at the time, but that is now in every day’s newspapers.

Speakers

Are you invited as a speaker for a manel? Suggest a woman as an alternative or co-speaker. If you accidentally end up in a manel, contact the organizer about it. ‘Superstar tax speakers’ even have a greater responsibility in this regard: by speaking up you can change the system. There are plenty of other tax conferences at which you can present.

Providers of financial and human resources

Funders of conferences and employers of potential speakers also have a role to play. This is especially the case for governmental organizations, universities and companies that claim to attach great importance to diversity. They can follow the example of the OECD and the UN and refuse to finance manels, issue guidelines that no manels are to be organized from within their organization and ask their employees not to participate in manels.

Women

It takes two to tango. More diversity is not just a responsibility of conference organizers, but also of potential female speakers. Women should not be overcome by insecurity or modesty and immediately say 'no' when asked to speak. Apparently, the organizer is of the opinion that you are knowledgeable on the topic, so why not accept the invitation? If you are not available or if it is not your topic: feel obliged to suggest another woman.

To conclude

If we want to make sure that our tax conferences deliver the best results, explore all possible angles of a topic, and are an inspiration to all tax scholars and practitioners, diversity of the speakers group is key. We tax people can make our own 'no more tax manels' pledge. Not necessarily by signing websites, but, much more importantly, by simple and concrete individual actions. Together we can make this happen.

[1] An excerpt of these *Guidelines for OECD staff* can be found on page 11 of Christal Morehouse, Alla Volkova, Silvia Fierescu, An end to manels: closing the gender gap at Europe's top policy events, Open Society Foundations, 6 March 2018, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/end-manels-closing-gender-gap-europe-s-top-policy-events>.

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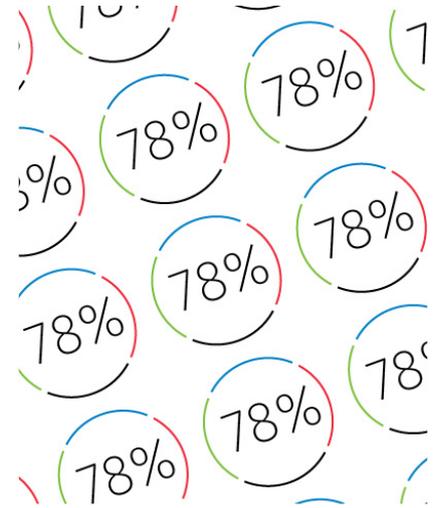
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