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FEATURED

Thoma Bravo's Irina Hemmers: Diversity an important element in firm's growth

'It's elevating to see these diverse candidates, whether it's women or minorities, in senior leadership positions.'

It was curiosity that guided Irina Hemmers, partner at Thoma Bravo, into the realm of private equity. Though an "accidental" entry into the industry, she has now accumulated 22 years as an investor. She shared her journey with PE Hub Europe as part of our series of interviews featuring senior women in private equity.

Hemmers joined the Chicago-based software investor from Inflexion in 2023 to lead its London office. The firm's European investments since then include EQS in February, Hypergene in December and Logex in March 2023.

Starting her career in consulting at McKinsey, Hemmers received sponsorship from the company to pursue a master's degree in the US. "I loved consulting from an intellectual perspective, but it mostly ends with a PowerPoint presentation." While seeking a career change to focus on international economics, several PE firms approached her in her final year. "It was out of curiosity, more than anything else, that I took a role in private equity."

Hemmers' first deal focused on a waste management company. The senior deal lead had a "strong" view that to invest with "conviction and confidence", a deep understanding of both the product and the people in the business was required. "We did part of our due diligence joining the waste collection trucks and collecting bins."

This experience underscored the



Thoma Bravo partner Irina Hemmers

importance of delving into the operational intricacies of a business rather than "crunching models and analysing financial data", she said. This is what distinguishes a "good" investor. She has also moved her decision-making from 90 percent analysis and intellect and just 10 percent intuition to 20 percent intuition.

Hemmers also reflected on how a bit more bravery would have been useful to avoid missed opportunities earlier in her career. "Because it's always easy to turn down a deal as there's always risk in it."

Mid-level hurdles

Private equity wasn't as commonly considered a mainstream career path in the early 2000s. Despite that, Hemmers

was intrigued by the industry's blend of intellectual curiosity, which is similar to consulting, but with tangible long-term impacts.

But diversity was not one of the industry's strong points. "We are having this conversation right now about the lack of females in the industry, but there was a total drought of diversity and a lack of awareness. There wasn't any recognition that it was a problem."

Hemmers too lacked awareness and "behaved like everybody else" in the team. "My communication style was modelled very much after all my male colleagues. As I stepped into more senior roles and took more responsibility, my success became a lot more defined by building networks and relationships." This is when she became cognisant of the industry's lack of diversity.

Though the industry still grapples with diversity issues, it has improved a lot, she said.

Five years ago, diversity initiatives were often seen as a "tick-the-box exercise" to satisfy investor or market demands. "Now there's a genuine sense that it's better for the firm because we get a better outcome on decision-making if we have diversity of individuals, hence, diversity of viewpoints and decision-making."

But there are still problems, particularly at mid-level, where the dropout rate is the highest, and at entry level. It's crucial to ensure that "the diverse pool of candidates is as successful as the historical intake and

gets the appropriate help when advancing in their career”.

Mentorship model

This is where the “mentorship model” plays a significant role, Hemmers emphasised.

She wants to be a role model as a senior woman in the industry. “Ultimately, we can have a lot of good intentions, but we only attract candidates who see senior people in respective firms that have succeeded, that look like them, that they can associate with and relate to.”

Diversity remains lacking in senior leadership teams, she said. “We have several diverse partners in the firm, but it’s nowhere near 50 percent or more.

If somebody comes in and says: is there anybody in the senior team who looks like me, talks like me? If that’s missing, for me that’s the biggest challenge.”

The industry is now fishing in a much broader pool and getting the right candidates, she said. “It’s elevating to see these diverse candidates, whether it’s women or minorities, in senior leadership positions.”

It will probably take another five to 10 years for more of these candidates to reach those top positions, but the industry has a strong focus on making it happen. “It’s not

just because we think it’s good for society, it also comes back to how we perform better as a business and make better decisions.”

In recent years, Thoma Bravo has invested in educating on diversity, not just within the firm, but also across its portfolio companies.

Diversity has become an “important” element in building the firm, starting at the entry level and extending throughout all tiers of seniority, she said.

Additionally, the pathway to success in this industry involves “winning the hearts and minds” of senior decision-makers within the target companies. “Whether it’s a founder, a CEO, that group has become a lot more varied and diverse.”

Embrace individuality

Hemmers’ advice centres on embracing “not being like everybody else” in the industry and using it as a competitive advantage, even though it may not always be comfortable. “If you are the only woman in an important management meeting, the others will recognise that and remember you more easily. That gives you an opportunity.”

The industry must empower females to use that opportunity of “being different” and gain greater awareness, she said.

“Allow them early on to have an impact in these meetings and put a mark on those meetings.”

The connections formed in the early stages of one’s career often lay the foundation for long-term relationships, and that’s what paves the way to deal opportunities. “I would say take it on board, don’t try to disappear and make yourself invisible, and fit in and be like everybody else.”

Senior leaders must ensure that women are not sidelined or silenced, she said. “Because that is one of the biggest challenges we have in a room full of men.”

A good work-life balance is also important because the deal-making environment is both rewarding and taxing. Hemmers achieved balance by acknowledging that she can’t get 100 percent in both personal and professional life. Aiming for 80 percent is good enough for both parts of the equation.

This balancing act becomes challenging at the midpoint career level and this is where firms should focus on providing more “support and flexibility”, she added.

Editor’s note: PE Hub Europe’s interviews with senior women in private equity will appear throughout March. The previous instalment was with KKR’s Franziska Kayser.