1. Introduction

This chapter examines the career development of six female directors and six male directors within a leading British telecommunications company. The aim is to highlight the key factors in their career development which, in their view, have contributed to their later success. We compare the experiences of the men and women for differences and similarities.

While there is no evidence to suggest that women are less suited to managerial careers than men (Powell, 1990), the women in management literature suggests that the process of career development may be different for males and females. Women managers tend to occupy different types of managerial jobs than male managers. They tend to hold "specialist" support roles, such as personnel and marketing, rather than "generalist" line management roles which generally have higher status than support roles. Furthermore, women managers in the UK are clustered in certain business areas, such as the public sector, which is featured by lower pay than the private sector, and service organisations, such as retailing (Davidson and Cooper, 1992). Some major initiatives have been taken to address these issues. A Hansard Society Commission was set up in 1989, which reported on what it saw as "formidable barriers" for women at the top in 1990 and again five years later (McRae, 1995). Good progress had been made in some areas, and some progress in most areas, towards getting more women into positions of power and influence. But at board level, only 1% of British executive directors were women in 1995. One of the Commission’s outcomes was Opportunity 2000, launched in 1991 under the direction of Britain’s top business leaders, and organisations which joined showed a doubling of women directors from 8% to 16% by 1995 (McRae, 1995). In 1996, women made up a third of all British managers, and 13% of senior and middle managers were women, but only 3.3% of directors. Where women were board members, they tended to be non-executive directors (EOC, 1997). Thus it can be seen that British women managers still have a long way to go to reach top management in numbers similar to their male peers. Yet this study will show that some women have succeeded to a remarkable level, and we
will try to understand how they have done so.

2. Career Development Theory

Career theorists such as Super (1957) and Schein (1971) assume that a career is a life-long, uninterrupted experience of work, which can be divided up into neat stages of development, starting with initial ideas about working and ending with retirement. These stages echo the chronological stages identified by researchers on the process of (male) adult development such as Erikson (1963) and Levinson (1978). There is no allowance for any variation or aberration from the norms they establish. However, the patterns of women's career development are frequently constrained by family as well as workplace commitments and responsibilities, unlike those of men (although this may well be changing in the late 1990s). Therefore, Astin (1984) proposed that career development theory should describe women's careers separately from men's. Her model of career development is based upon four constructs, which she believes shape women's career development: work motivation, work expectations, sex-role socialisation and structure of opportunity, which includes factors such as sex-role stereotyping, distribution of jobs and discrimination.

Larwood and Gutek (1987) concluded that any theory of women's career development must take account of five factors. The first is career preparation, or how females are brought up to view the idea of a career and whether they believe they will have one or not. Availability of opportunities should be taken into consideration, and whether they are limited for women, compared with men. Marriage is the next factor, viewed as neutral for men, but harmful to the careers of women. Similarly, pregnancy and having children inevitably cause women to take some kind of career break. The final factor is timing and age, as career breaks and family relocations often mean that women's careers do not follow the same chronological patterns as those of men.

Powell and Mainiero (1992) claimed that women have two overriding concerns in their lives, for their career and for others (e.g. family and friends). Their model therefore incorporates the influence of personal, organisational and societal factors to describe the balance between work and non-work aspects of life which most women strive to achieve. They develop the concept of "emphasis on career" versus "emphasis on relationships with others", which they claim dominates the choices women make about their careers. A woman may change to emphasise one or the other at various points in her life. The model portrays these as opposite banks of "the river of time". Powell and Mainiero's model differs further from classic models of career development in that it does not assume straightforward, linear progression throughout the career.