

Off the record



Vital Statistics

Name:	Evelyn Fitzpatrick
Year of entry into CPA:	1981
Title:	Director of Finance and Administration
Company:	Focus Ireland Limited
Qualifications:	FCPA

Evelyn Fitzpatrick clearly relishes a challenge. Her willingness to make a leap into the great unknown means her career to date has included stints in publishing, fashion modelling, distribution, IT, retail and the charities sector. And you get the feeling she's not finished yet.

Her first job was a researcher in publishing, a position which saw her "travel the length and breadth of Ireland", before she switched to modelling for a successful and varied two years. "But you're aware that, like being an athlete, it's something you do for a short time.

"I liked the idea of managing people, and I had a head for figures, so I gave accountancy a try. I won an award in the first year's exams and that gave me the confidence to continue."

Evelyn joined Marks and Spencer as an assistant management accountant in her last year. She qualified in 1981, despite giving birth to her first child the same year. "I got great experience in M&S across a wide area of financial disciplines, which assisted my career progression," she says.

In 1990, nine years after she joined the retail giant, she was appointed finance director for Ireland. "At that time, I was one of the few women in a male-dominated industry. But that changed very quickly. And now accountancy is one of the careers where women really are breaking through."

Despite her demanding role, she continually added more strings to her bow, in treasury, taxation and pensions. She was also involved with Dublin Chamber of Commerce, the Dublin Inner City Partnership, and the Irish Youth Foundation. She has also participated in the Leinster CPA Society, which she chaired in 2007, and currently serves on the Continuing Professional Education (CPE) Committee for the CPA Institute. Evelyn has also just been co-opted to the Council of the Institute.

"I put a lot of my time and effort in, and what I got back in return was learning," she says.

After ten years as finance director at M&S, Evelyn was headhunted to her current role as Director of Finance and Administration at Focus Ireland. She was involved in setting systems and infrastructure in place to prepare the charity for expansion in response to the increase in homelessness.

"In keeping with their value of stewardship, I developed highly transparent accounting procedures and good corporate governance. As testament of this Focus has won the Leinster Society of Chartered Accountants published accounts award four times," she says.

"This is the most challenging time to be working for a charity, because you're in a situation where the economy is going into a downturn, the government is cutting back on funding, and corporate donations are down. So you're trying to find ways to do more with less. But I'm proud to say we've come through a difficult year, and have managed to retain all our services."

Focus Ireland plans to deliver 800 new homes as part of a four-year strategy. "The stalling of the building boom is a bit of a setback, but we're navigating through it," she says.

This isn't the only challenge she will face in the year ahead. "I've just set up my own consultancy firm to assist charities prepare for the new legislation. Charities will be more regulated and have more reporting requirements, and I'm working with the CPA in helping the sector prepare."

Evelyn's role with Focus Ireland will move to a consultancy basis from late spring. As she says herself in a final note, which may just provide the motto for her life: "If you want something done, ask a busy person."

Two minutes in the mind of... Evelyn Fitzpatrick

1. What's the most pleasurable part of your working day?
Ending a meeting with a successful outcome.
2. Which three people would you most like to invite to dinner?
Bill Clinton, Bob Geldof and Robin Williams.
3. What would be on the menu?
Scrumptious Italian food, great dynamic friction between my guests, with a flavour of entertainment from Robin.
4. What do you drive?
Renault Megane Sport.
5. What's the best career decision you've made?
Joining Marks & Spencer as an assistant management accountant.
6. What's the last book you read?
The Audacity of Hope by Barack Obama.
7. Name your greatest indulgence.
Travel, short breaks and family holidays.
8. What's the most rewarding aspect of your job?
Our success in settling homeless people into their own homes.
9. What's the most essential item in your briefcase?
My Blackberry.
10. Where's your favourite restaurant table?
Trocadero on Andrew St, and for the odd special occasion L'Ecrivain on Baggot St in Dublin.
11. What's the nicest thing you've done today?
Giving my son the loan of my car.
12. Where do you go to clear your lungs?
Bushy Park which is just minutes from my home, but when I can I love to get to our house in Co. Galway.
13. What are the best - and worst – pieces of advice you've been given?
The best was do accountancy, and the worst was buy Eircom shares.
14. Where's your favourite business travel destination?
London.
15. What three items would you bring to a desert island?
Suntan lotion, my family and lots of music.
16. What's on your iPod play list - at the moment?
U2, Bruce Springsteen, Van Morrison, Il Divo, Rod Stewart, Christy Moore.
17. "Work expands to fill the time available for its completion" – true or false?
True if you allow it. Time management and keep it simple will prevent it.
18. Which adage do you live by?
Think positive and have common sense and a sense of humour.
19. If you were starting all over again, what would you do differently?
Get more experience in other countries in a wide mix of business.
20. What piece of wisdom would you offer to someone starting out in your profession?
Get experience in different types of businesses. Learn how to bring value adding financial solutions to business problems. Speak in jargon-free, plain English.