

Business

AT THE COALFACE Dissatisfaction with the demands of City life prompted one executive to look for something better

Joining the dots to see a bigger picture

JACK TAYLOR

A fast-growing global network is giving professional women a new confidence, writes **Gideon Spanier**

It is, Simona Barbieri says, her “kitchen table philosophy”, but there isn’t a kitchen table to be seen. Instead, about 150 well-dressed women have gathered in the glossy London Bridge offices of the consulting firm EY, overlooking the Thames, Tower Bridge and the City, to hear how they can change their working lives.

There was a table. Ms Barbieri launched Hub Dot, a combination of a word-of-mouth networking event with retailing, from her own kitchen table at her home in Parsons Green, west London, because she felt that women needed help juggling work, family and personal demands. But the philosophy behind Hub Dot’s home birth in 2012 is the same now — to help women “support and seek inspiration from each other ... It’s about bringing people together.”

The former Goldman Sachs events organiser, who quit the City a decade ago, set up her first meeting by contacting friends, fellow mothers and old work colleagues. The idea was that the women would share their stories, each speaking for a few minutes, with a few stalls selling clothes and food — less *Loose Women*, more *Sisters Are Doin’ It For Themselves*.

From that small beginning has grown an impressive network. Hub Dot claims to have 15,000 members and has staged gatherings in 11 cities around the world from Milan to Berlin, Houston to Washington. Team Dot even has a foothold in the Gambia. The company has raised £150,000 from private investors and is seeking more funds to back its plans for ecommerce and expansion into India and the Middle East.

Yet Ms Barbieri doesn’t like the word “networking”. She believes it comes with an expectation that you have to impress. Hub Dot, she says, is about connecting people at different stages of their careers.

Ms Barbieri, 43, a mother of three, grew up in Naples and came to London in her early twenties, before becoming involved in events for Goldman Sachs. “I didn’t like the



Simona Barbieri began Hub Dot from her kitchen in west London, but the network now stretches from Africa to America

culture — although I met my husband. I never bought into the fashion, the jacket, the hair up. I thought: ‘I’ll enter the jungle and be as hard as them.’ I played that role.

“If I’d been given more chances of exploring [different things] in the City,

‘Corporates need to be more open. The old ways haven’t worked. Women get to vice-president level and then leave’

maybe I wouldn’t have left. Why can’t I celebrate what I am, apart from the world of work?”

Ms Barbieri is almost the same age as Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook, who famously argued that women have to “lean into” their careers and strive for leadership positions in their jobs, an approach that Ms Barbieri thinks has its limitations.

“Yes, some women want to work in the boardroom, but not everyone

does. Women get fulfilled in different ways. Values [like] empathy, compassion, aren’t perceived as strong or ambitious. Corporates need to be more open. The old ways haven’t worked. Women get to vice-president level and then leave.”

That they don’t want to stay, or want to find a better way, is clear from the rise of Hub Dot. She describes its events as like a “piazza”, where women of all ages can meet each other without being labelled.

“Women gather in a piazza in Italy, a tea house in China, a pub in London,” she says.

Or in this case EY, Hub Dot’s first corporate sponsor, and its offices in the shadow of the Shard. Here, dozens of women take it in turns to tell their story in a brief 60 seconds or so. There’s a common theme of reinvention — from fortysomething women leaving well-paid careers to strike out on their own, to a twenty-something who has launched her own early morning yoga classes.

Speakers have inspirational stories to share, each of them greeted with warm applause, never more so than

when one tells her audience: “I hope you start to find your own voice.”

Instead of carrying names and job titles around, every woman wears a coloured circle badge on their chest — the identifying “dot” in the company’s name. “I wanted to remove that work tag — no senior, junior, CEO or ‘I’m work experience,’” Ms Barbieri says. “I really wanted to help those women who feel they don’t really have a clear identity that they could actually be celebrated.”

There are five colours to choose from. Red is “I’m established”. Yellow means “I have an idea, can anyone help?” Green, the most popular choice, is “I’m here to be inspired”. Blue stands for “I’m here to socialise and shop”. Purple is “I want to tell you about ... (my story/my work)”. It’s an ice-breaker in the best tradition of social gatherings.

“It’s so no one really knows what you do and the conversation can start with ‘Hi, what is your story?’, rather than ‘What do you do?’ If I’m a lawyer, why would I want to be networking with lawyers outside the ten hours I’m in the office?”