

The sisters are not digging it: construction, mining fails to tick womens' boxes

Federal Government suggestions of quotas to encourage female participation at executive levels, have drawn criticism from leading construction, resource and mining industry recruiters.

Sophie Macdonald, principal of Brisbane's Skye Recruitment, specialises in matching job seeking professionals with employers in the construction, mining and resources sector. The company covers civil construction, civil consultancy, mining, and oil and gas.

"We are on the rising wave of a resources boom in Australia and daily we face the challenge of finding professional graduates to fill positions," Macdonald said. "So it would be impossible to specify a female quota."

However, prominent SKIRT member Chamindri Samarakoon, a civil engineer with Watpac, believes the proposed government quota may help in attracting more women into engineering. SKIRT is a University of Queensland club for female engineering students.

Founder of the Women in Mining and Resources Network in Western Australia (WIMWA) Sabina Shugg, is doing her best to attract women into the mining and energy sectors too. She has been named the Women in Resources Champion, for being an outstanding role model to people in the resources industry, and the broader community.

Sabina Shugg – Manager-Mining at Momentum Partners, Perth

Chamber of Minerals and Energy of Western Australia (CME) Chief Executive Reg Howard-Smith believes people like Sabina are helping to prevent skills shortages in the future by encouraging Western Australian women to enter into the mining and energy sectors.

"With skills shortages highly likely in the future due to anticipated sustained growth it is people like Sabina who lead by example and encourage West Australian women to either take this as their career path or give encouragement to women currently within the mining and energy sectors," said Mr Howard-Smith.

At the WIMWA conference held in September last year more than 250 women attended and were provided with support strategies and general education about the resources sector. As a consequence several young women from Perth high schools expressed their interest in entering the mining industry.

Women not attracted

"Despite top of the range salaries and conditions on offer for even new graduates, women are just not being attracted into the sector," Shugg said. "It's not just women who are rare in the mining and infrastructure job market, but men too."

"There is a global shortage of engineers and we are recruiting from all over the world. The government would be better served in planning to attract more undergraduates into the profession. This boom will be continuing for at least the next 20 years, particularly in Western Australia and Queensland."

Macdonald has pioneered a graduate development program with a liaison officer, whose role is to mentor graduates and undergraduates, into the sector. "The statistics on the participation of women in the industry are very poor," she said. "At the University of WA in 2004 17% of engineering students were women, not rising at all in 2009 despite the mining boom in that state. At the University of Queensland in 2004, 15% of engineering students were women, rising only to 16% in

2009.

YOWIE initiative shunned

“This is despite the federal government’s Year of Women in Engineering initiative, where the discipline was promoted in universities and schools all over Australia.”

There are a number of reasons why women are not attracted into this lucrative business, according to Skye Recruitment.

Macdonald said, “Typically the thinking was women were not attracted to engineering because they were male dominated industries, often site based in remote areas. But there are plenty of CBD based positions in civil consultancy, and that doesn’t seem to be attracting women either.

“I believe it is no longer the off-site conditions deterring women from entering the field, but rather engineering as a profession. This could be because low numbers of women in engineering in the past, may have led to women not considering engineering, as they have no positive female role models.”

Macdonald is positive about the future however, as the situation for women is slowly changing.

Slow transition

“More women are being attracted into environmental sciences and engineering. This could be due to changes in traditional family roles where women are now becoming primary earners for their families where in the past this was not as common,” she said. “This change in traditional gender roles may lead to future increases of women in engineering. However, this will no doubt be a slow transition.”

Macdonald’s personal opinion of the quota idea may raise some eyebrows, considering she runs one of Australia’s top recruitment agencies, specialising in a very testosterone fuelled resources sector. Skye Recruitment was named 56th on the BRW Fast Starters List in 2009 and was also the fastest growing recruitment company in Queensland. Recently, Sophie was named one of our top 50 female entrepreneurs.

“I believe that the best person for the job should be selected for their skills, abilities, qualifications, not gender or race. Quotas turn back the clock for women and assume we can’t compete in our own right.

“What needs to be addressed urgently is the shortage of undergraduates selecting civil construction, mining, oil and gas, and civil engineering careers. Clearly for Generation Y it’s not just about the money or career path or no one would be studying anything other than engineering.”

Skye Recruitment was formed in response to a growing need among technical employers for a specialist agency that understands their industry, requirements and people.

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