

Workplaces that *WORK* – for women in non-traditional careers

By Sagieta Ramserran, BSc, MCP

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Women now make up 52% of the total labour force, and during the last three decades they have made great strides in entering many of the so-called 'non-traditional' fields. However, women have found it particularly difficult to enter and advance in the fields of engineering and applied sciences.

By 1991, women had obtained a growing share of university degrees in non-traditional areas such as commerce, law, biological sciences, agriculture, dentistry, medicine and veterinary medicine. And in community colleges,

women accounted for increasing proportions of diplomas granted in business, natural resources, engineering and transportation.

By 2001, Canadian women comprised 59% of the total undergraduate student enrolment, 50% of the graduate student enrolment, and 63% of the students in agricultural and biological sciences. However, only 30% of students in mathematics and physical sciences and 26% of students in engineering and applied sciences were women. Despite the larger numbers of women entering science, engineering, and technology educational programs in

the past decade, there has not been a commensurate increase in the numbers of women in decision-making positions in these fields.

In response to the recommendations of a national Task Force on Women in Science and Engineering, five regional National Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) chairs were established at universities, with three goals: to expand the number of women entering these careers; to increase the retention rate of those who choose a science and technology career; and to give stronger support to women who have entered the field.

What are the workplace issues women face because of gender?

Once women have been trained and hired for these non-traditional jobs, what are the workplace issues they face because of their gender? Are they as likely as their male counterparts to find job satisfaction in their careers? Do they believe they are able to contribute their knowledge and skills side by side with men? What can be done to create workplaces that would help them to feel 'accepted as equally skilled and capable' technicians, project managers, engineers, and scientists? These issues are of great concern today because of the current overall shortage of knowledge workers, particularly in technology, sciences and engineering.

Suggestions from women in Water and Wastewater careers

In my work as a consultant who helps organizations identify and remove roadblocks to progress, I make a point of seeking the opinions of those people who have an intimate knowledge of the organization's day-to-day operations, and those people who will be affected most by the changes to be implemented. When I was asked to contribute this article, I sought out the views of some of the women already working in water and wastewater careers in Western Canada.

The following insights are gleaned from feedback provided by a very small sample of women in water and wastewater careers in private and government workplaces,



both large and small. They provide a glimpse into the ‘everyday experiences’ of women in technical and professional jobs and thoughtful insights into some practices that could help to promote a more positive work environment, not just for women, but for all workers.

These W&WW female professionals noted that significant progress has been made by women in the fields of science and engineering in general, and that the increasing numbers of women in their workplaces have made it easier for the women who are already there or who might be aspiring to these careers. ***However, they also said much more progress needs to be made in treating women with the respect they deserve as competent professionals, and in building a more positive workplace environment for all:***

“The more men and women that have experiences working with women in these non-traditional jobs ... the easier it will become.”

“We need to break down stereotypes and make the workplace more accepting to all individuals and all differences such as gender, culture, and sexual orientation.”

Feedback focused on the following specific areas:

- Have more women in senior positions
- Provide mentoring and opportunities for advancement
- Ensure a respectful workplace culture exists
- Provide flex time opportunities
- Provide HR consultation and training if necessary

It should be noted that these findings are very similar to those identified in a UBC study which examined factors impacting the attrition of women in engineering careers. The research revealed that problems women experienced in the workplace included:

- Sex-role stereotyping and a feeling of low self-confidence
- A tense workplace environment
- Slower career advancement and lower salaries compared to men.

- A feeling of being ignored and excluded from various work and social events
- Lack of support in the work place

It should be noted that many of these are the same issues that Aboriginal, visible minority, immigrant, new Canadian workers, persons with disabilities, and other workers have cited as barriers to their full participation in Canadian workplaces.

More women in senior positions

Not surprisingly, the feedback from W&WW female professionals suggested that having more women in senior or leading roles in their organizations and in the profession as a whole would help to reinforce their belief in themselves and in their career aspirations. They noted that women bring very high levels of skills and knowledge to their jobs, but that the current lack of women in leadership means that women starting out are less likely to believe that a career ladder exists for them, and that even if it does, they wouldn’t necessarily know how to climb it.

“The fewer women in these roles, the more likely it is that a male peer with equal experience and training would be seen as the more appropriate fit for management roles.”

“Promote more women into managerial roles – they are skilled, they can do the job – let them prove themselves. The quality of females in this industry is very high... this helps to improve the general acceptance of women in these workplaces.”

“The more women there are in the industry... the more will be attracted.”

Mentoring and opportunities for advancement

Some women pointed out that mentoring has been particularly helpful to them, especially when starting out in their chosen careers. Others noted that the opportunity to prove themselves on challenging assignments and learning to deal with consultants, suppliers, and contractors have been

invaluable professional development opportunities, which in turn helps them to feel more confident to handle future assignments.

“Establishing career paths is important both for females just starting out and for those who have been in the workplace for a number of years.”

“I had a manager that became my mentor. She was one of the few females in technical roles of a large organization. Her success and strength in technical matters had a big influence when I was just starting out.”

These women noted that having a male mentor can have an especially powerful influence and help to set an example for other male workers who might not be as encouraging of their female peers, especially since “not being taken seriously as an engineer” is a common occurrence in some workplaces and specializations.

“Trying to learn and understand in a male dominated industry – where it is assumed that you don’t know because you are a woman.”

“Having a supervisor that did not even think that my gender may affect my work helped me to gain confidence.”

With the severe shortage of qualified workers now, and the projected retirement of a large number of senior executives and managers within the next 10 years, it only makes sense to prepare women for more senior level positions.

Respectful workplace culture

Many workers in non-traditional jobs have said that they have not encountered coworkers who are openly disrespectful of women. Rather they sense a covert disrespect, where they are not taken seriously, are ignored, or are excluded from inside information. In a smaller workplace, disrespect in the workplace has to be monitored closely because one individual can have a very large impact on productivity and cohesiveness of the work team. This is magnified when the work is being performed under tight timelines, on shift, and/or at a remote location.

"I've encountered many individuals that have an open disrespect for individuals because of their culture, religion, or sexual orientation."

"The strengths of a diverse work force are being noticed. Different people provide new perspectives that lead to creative solutions."

Age difference is now a significant contributing factor to workplace diversity in many workplaces. According to the *2004 Environmental Labour Market (ELM) Report* – Canadian Council for Human Resources in the Environmental Industry (noe ECO Canada), across Canada there is a clustering of environmental practitioners in the 20 – 30 and 45 – 55 age ranges, and far fewer practitioners in the 30 – 45 age range. Water-quality testing and monitoring, resource management, and water pollution abatement (45%), followed by waste management activities (39%), were the two most prevalent environmental activities engaged in by organizations employing environmental practitioners in 2003.

Many studies have pointed out that younger workers have very different expectations than older workers and as result they need to be managed differently. Younger women in non-traditional jobs do report more challenging situations because of their gender and their youth.

"Some male workers find it difficult to take orders from a woman – let alone a

younger woman just starting out in her career."

"I have worked side by side with some older male counterparts without us exchanging any conversation!"

Provide flextime opportunities

The September 2005 report entitled: *Environmental Scan for the Public Service of Canada - A Tool for Identifying Current and Future Human Resources Needs* noted the increased numbers of women in the workforce has resulted in childcare and eldercare issues becoming increasingly important as workplace issues and that young workers tend to have less patience for 'climbing the corporate ladder,' have higher salary expectations, are more inclined to look for better benefits and pension plans when comparing potential employers, and do not expect to stay in their current job for the long term.

For comparison, a study of 269 information technology companies in the US, published in *CIO.com September 2006*, indicated that the five leading methods used to motivate or retain staff (a high portion of which were younger male workers) were: job specific training (63%), flextime (61%), recognition programs (49%), comp days (41%) and business training (39%). Day care and elder assistance was listed by 8% of the firms.

Once again the feedback from W&WW female professionals noted that flex time

and healthy workplace practices are very important to them. They indicated that some W&WW organizations have already made significant progress in responding to these needs, and that some *"have allocated a specific number of family leave days per year to employees."* But much more needs to be done, including dealing with the issues surrounding parental leave (both maternal and paternal) and work life balance because *the pressure to work beyond what is needed for a healthy balanced life is increasing. We need more flexibility in our work schedules, more vacation time, and better benefits.*

"More have implemented flextime – and healthy workplace practices."

"Unfortunately, some smaller firms avoid hiring women of child-bearing age for fear they will leave."

"Implementing flextime is particularly important for young mothers."



"Encourage more men to take paternity leave so that taking time off to have a family is not an issue specific to women."

HR consultation and appropriate training

When employees ask to be valued for the skills and knowledge they bring to the workplace, they are asking for no more than their employers expect for themselves: honest communications, respectful treatment, and acknowledgement that they are individuals with needs, personal lives, and a desire to contribute. This desire to contribute, to be engaged, is central to why and how people work. It is also critical to how much people are willing to give of themselves to their employer, and to whether not they will stay with an employer, especially today when professionals have a reasonably good chance of finding 'something better.'

In *Investing in Excellence, 1996-2001*, the Ministry of Science and Technology referred to the results of a 1998 survey report produced by the Human Resources Research Institute on *Managing R&D Personnel: A Challenge for Canadian Organizations*. The survey found that organizations are especially challenged in their management of Science & Technology employees.



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“Four principal characteristics of S&T employees were identified.

- Employees are highly powerful in that they are a key facet of the organization’s competitive advantage and, therefore, are likely to leave if their expectations and needs are not met. They are involved in innovative work that is difficult to control closely and are more subject to knowledge obsolescence.
- Employees are considered individualists given that they often prefer working on their own and often develop a significant attachment to their research work rather than their organization.
- S&T employees complain about a lack of recognition for their work. They would like to receive salary increases and promotions while continuing on a research career path. They also want more recognition from their immediate supervisor and from the management team.
- Employees want to maintain and improve their competencies. They especially want more time to attend lectures and conferences, and they want to be involved in more interesting work.”

W&WW female professionals suggested that companies should make use of external professional human resource assistance to address specific needs, such as:

- Training in job specific skills and in the transferable skills, such as

communication skills and personal effectiveness.

- Developing a respectful workplace culture, including training as appropriate.
- Training for managers on how to manage a diverse workforce, including women.
- Working towards a more representative workforce by continuing to improve employee equity hiring programs and/or hiring from a wider labour pool.

The evidence that employee engagement is a key driver of organizational performance continues to grow.

Some lessons for water and wastewater workplaces

A number of articles in the 2006 Fall issue of *Western Canada Water* pointed out the urgent need for water and wastewater employers to address some of the more critical HR issues that would help them to attract and retain more of their high quality employees.

Hopefully this information will cause some W&WW workplaces to: examine their ‘informal practices’ with regard to women in their workplace; ensure that a workplace culture that respects all differences is encouraged; and address work-life balance needs on an individual basis.

Smaller firms may have a particular advantage here, since it may be easier to adapt and adjust to the fluctuating needs of their employees. Surprisingly,

senior management leadership can have a greater impact than the dollars spent here. Not surprisingly, more and more workers (especially professional women) are choosing to work for smaller companies because they tend to be more flexible in meeting their flex-time needs, supporting work-at-home options, and providing the kind of environment where they are made to feel “like part of a big family.” •

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Sagietta was one of the two principal researchers who carried out the Update of the National Occupational Standards (NOS) for Environmental Practitioners on behalf of ECO Canada in 2003.
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