

Response to IWD 2017 NAWIC Scholarship

What does effective attraction of females to operational roles look like?

# Foreword

The journey for undertaking this research started two and a half years ago when commencing employment with Downer, my first job in the construction industry. One of my initial observations was the lack of diversity in the industry. I could not see it in our workforce or the culture. In my finance manager role, I was not reporting on it as I had previously in the mining industry. This concerned me, as with any metric, if you don't report on it, you're certainly not thinking about it, let alone driving it, or establishing a point of accountability.

It was my first job in construction, and assumed it's just the way the construction industry is. The issue with that is my context, my lens, my baseline has been remote mine sites across outback Australia and I was now in Port Melbourne in a construction industry head office.

This got me wondering - is it because, as an industry (construction), we did not understand the benefits of diversity? Did we not see the links between diversity and creating a culture that truly embraces thought leadership and innovation? Did we not see it as part of the labour shortage solution?

Then I remembered some key words from an Executive General Manager I previously worked for in mining "what are *you* going to do about it?" or "what's *your* plan?". His response was always intended to empower his workforce to act when they identified a challenge or a hurdle which they brought it to him (usually as a complaint).

Some of the workforce found this approach very confronting. Rather than being a spectator of the business and of the leadership they were suddenly forced to buy-in and take ownership for the outcome. Many found this to be too much; too much ownership, too much responsibility, too much accountability.

Consequently, many people left – but that was okay because he was consciously transforming the culture. For me and many others this was empowering and exciting, for me it screamed opportunity and somewhere to focus my passions. In finance (my profession) you see many patterns in data that allow you to grasp the issues or gaps between reality and the strategy that the business is striving towards.

With this approach in mind, I commenced organising initiatives and started discussing diversity at Downer. During the 2017 IWD (International Women's Day) activities an email came through from NAWIC (National Association of Women In Construction) promoting a research scholarship opportunity. I thought it would be valuable for the construction industry to know how to attract women to operational roles in a similar way as the mining industry had done. I could not understand what the barriers to entry were compared to mining that prohibited operational diversity. The aim is to return to industry very practical findings and easy to apply recommendations to assist improving the gender balance positioning.

The research into finding effective strategies to attract women into operational roles has become a large part of my life. The research method of auto ethnography has proved to be an emotional drain as well as a support as I explored people's accounts, views and feelings and referred it against my own former experiences and bias.

I would like to recognise and thank Downer not only for the support of this research, but also the interest, openness and eagerness to learn from it. In the short time I have been working for Downer it has made very fast progress in putting diversity on the agenda and increasing numbers of women in its workforce.

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# Executive Summary

Gender rhetoric started shifting in the early 1990s towards where it is today, however participation in the construction industry is lower than any other Australian industry and has remained stagnant for decades. Diversity is a key focus area in Downer and seen as more than just addressing social inequality. There is a strong recognition that the diverse perspectives and representations drives innovation and financial performance as well as being a key driver in creating a more engaged and productive workforce.

Like many other organisations, the challenge to management is now how to successfully and sustainably attract females to operational roles, to make a real difference to the organisation's diversity. In an eight month period in 2017, since making an overt commitment to diversity, nearly half of new recruits (18.2%) who started in new roles in Downer Infrastructure Services were women (9.3%). This is an outstanding result and demonstrates the commitment of Downer to increasing the diversity of its workforce. This created a great environment to research what works and what does not in attracting women to operational roles in the Construction Industry.

The research supported doing something, taking some kind of action, even small steps or tweaking, rather than trying to perfectly plan and execute a whole of organisation solution to diversity. In fact, solving the whole or organisation diversity "problem" seemed to cripple parts of the organisation in terms of actual diversity progress.

Some of these findings highlighted that:

- Cascading reporting from executive to crew level on gender diversity is required to disrupt the status quo and to change the view of who is accountable for identifying solutions to the perceived challenges in increasing gender diversity and therefore attracting women to operational roles.
- There is a need to cast the labour net wide! Vacant operational roles must be communicated through advertisements for female employees - outside the current male labour pool (and channels), to reach and attract diverse applicants. Continuing to advertise and select employees from the same sources and channels will only ensure the same outcomes around diversity.
- Being specific about what the role requires and what it doesn't from position description to advertising to screening is essential. The research demonstrated that women tended to assume applicants need to fulfil 100% of the selection criteria. If experience is not required – state it! If training is provided - state it!
- Understand where the organisations labour comes from and the drivers and motivators for sourcing applicants. Ensure external talent agencies, labour hire agencies, and internal talent and sourcing departments have contractual terms or key performance criteria that ensure applicants are diverse, and have a cultural and strategic fit.
- Find and use communication mediums that reach ALL employees within the organisation will be required to attract women to operational roles. Workforces cannot help achieving the diversity strategy or any strategy if they don't know about it, and your current employees are your best advocates.

What became clear was the organisational framework required to achieve gender diversity was the same framework required for organisational and strategic success – the benefit of gender diversity is not just the diversity of thought women bring to the table, it is the culture and governance it requires.

As McKinsey and Co. reported recently to change the diversity playbook from gender rhetoric to tangible change, uncompromising execution, fresh bold thinking, and courageous leadership would be required of organisations<sup>1</sup>.

This paper provides the industry practical assistance with tangible change, uncompromising execution, fresh bold thinking, and steps to demonstrate courageous leadership. Achieving diversity in our workforce starts with the simple commitment, or a simple conscious effort to be aware of our bias when it comes to diversity. This paper hopes to provide you with some easy practical changes you can consider implementing either yourself, the team you operate in, or the wider business you belong to.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/leadership/time-for-a-new-gender-equality-playbook>

# Problem Summary

Currently the construction industry has the largest gender imbalance of any Australian industry. In a country where the working population is roughly a 50:50 gender divide<sup>2</sup> and the labour participation rate for women of working age (20 to 74 years) is 65.1%<sup>3</sup> the construction industry even falls behind the minerals industry<sup>4</sup> in gender imbalance. In 2016, overall female participation sits at 13% of the construction workforce with most of these women in clerical and administrative roles (77.9%) and a mere 5% employed as labourers, 4.25% as machinery operators and drivers and 1.5% in technical and trade vocations<sup>5</sup>. These statistics have been relatively stagnating for several decades.

With little female participation at the grass roots it is no surprise there is little female participation at supervisory, all levels of management and the boardroom. If there is not the “stock” at entry level, although hinged on statistically based assumptions, even less females will move up the ranks. With low participation of women at senior levels the career pathway is more challenging for those women in the workforce aspiring for career progression. This is not an uncommon problem with McKinsey & Co reporting more than 75% of CEOs include gender equality in their top ten business priorities, yet gender outcomes across the largest companies are still not changing.<sup>6</sup>

The proven benefits of female participation in the workplace include increased finance performance, enhanced innovation and decision making, improved customer relations and orientation, reduction of staff turnover, stronger corporate reputation, and attraction of the best talent and a higher level of employee satisfaction. A diverse organisation is a key driver in creating a more engaged and productive workforce. With the Australian construction industry labour market tightening from increased government spending which is expected to not only continue but intensify for a number of years, it is the perfect time to leverage the benefits of diversity. Welcoming women into the industry will go a long way to alleviating the impacts of labour shortage (such as bottlenecks on jobs, loss of productivity, and escalating labour costs) and result in a more sustainable construction industry avoiding the boom and bust cycle experienced by many other Australian industries. This in addition to the social inequity still experienced by Australian women that would be at least partially elevated by workplace parity, having choices and economic freedom:

- One in 5 women experience harassment within the workplace<sup>7</sup>.
- Domestic violence is the principle cause of homeless for women and their children<sup>8</sup>.
- One in three women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence... perpetrated by someone known to them<sup>9</sup>.

In summary, creating gender balance in a business is a social challenge and a strategic one for business.

Female participation relies on several factors including attraction, retention and career pathways. This research is focused on attraction as the first step in creating gender balance within the

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/featurearticlesbyCatalogue/7A40A407211F35F4CA257A2200120EAA?OpenDocument>

<sup>3</sup>

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/4125.0~Feb%202016~Main%20Features~Economic%20Security~615>

<sup>4</sup>

[http://www.nawo.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/NAW2607\\_infographic\\_op\\_sector\\_stats1.jpg](http://www.nawo.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/NAW2607_infographic_op_sector_stats1.jpg)

<sup>5</sup> Australian Government – Workplace Gender Equality Agency.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/leadership/time-for-a-new-gender-equality-playbook>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/education/face-facts/face-facts-gender-equality>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/domestic-violence/family-domestic-sexual-violence-in-australia-2018/contents/table-of-contents>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/education/face-facts/face-facts-gender-equality>

construction industry. Reasons cited for low female participation in the construction sector relating directly to attraction are often anecdotally connected with the perceived physical demands of the work, an unpleasant workplace environment (exposed to weather, dirty, dangerous), mobility of the workplace, ability to balance the hours with family demands as well as barriers to enter with requirement for experience rather than capability. Despite the low rates of female participation little research has been undertaken by the construction industry into the “blue collar” or “operational” space to test if the assumptions for low attraction of female applicants are valid. Gaining knowledge as to how companies in the construction industry successfully attract women into operational roles is required for the longevity of the industry.

Continuing to maintain the status quo of attracting, developing and promoting employees who “fit” the prevailing model of employee and leader prevents the industry’s capacity to evolve and to be innovative. “It could be said that the ability to accommodate women and handle the challenges of gender diversity are symptomatic of the industry’s ability to handle diversity on a broader scale, to synthesise difference, however it is defined, to bring about a greater creativity and imagination in the face of uncertainty”<sup>10</sup>.

This report is set out into four sections; section 1 sets out the methodology employed, section 2 details the research findings and context, section 3 lists the practical recommendations to the construction industry in response to the findings, and section 4 ties the paper together into a summary.

## Objectives

The objective of this research project is to identify and discover effective methods for attracting females into operational roles, and test effective change management. It is intended that this research will also identify barriers to attraction that negatively impact on female participation in the Australian construction industry’s operational roles.

The target group are female operational employees and their direct workgroup within the construction industry. The sample used have been predominately from the national Downer Roads business.

Testing the success of implementing a varied gender composition for crews as an attraction and retention method will be specifically tested. It is intended the results of this study can assist construction organisations develop programs aimed at increasing the employment of women in operational roles.

## Literature Review

There is an infinite and increasing number of studies and general literature that establish the significance of the positive impacts gender diversity has on organisational performance, such as:

- Women Matter – Gender Diversity, a corporate performance driver published McKinsey & Co.
- The impact of Gender Diversity on the performance of business teams: evidence from a field experiment published by Harvard Kennedy School.
- The business benefits of Gender Diversity published by Gallup.
- Why Diversity Matters published by McKinsey & Co.

The value of women’s contribution is well understood at senior level of organisations in Australia. But there has been little research completed on employees at the front line of operations, the understanding of the value of gender diversity at this level of the organisation, and the change

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ausimm.com.au/content/docs/wimreport.pdf>

management program required to ensure the gender diversity programs are successful at this level.

Most leaders in construction have followed an operational career path. Current research focuses on the benefits of gender diversity at the board room and executive level but not the operational level of the organisation which does not assist in ensuring the longer-term pipeline of diverse leadership. There is literature in operational focused diversity in the mining industry which provides helpful insights to potential barriers to entry and retention challenges. However, this research has some limitation with focus on professional operational roles for engineers, geologists, and metallurgists rather than similar operational employees in construction such as mobile plant and machinery operation, labouring and trades. The mining industry has a similar dynamic to construction in terms of increasing female participation, often project based roles often requiring employees to be geographically mobile, traditionally male workforces and industrial nature but there are differences such as the degree of remoteness, permanency of living arrangements and historic statutory prohibition of women working in mining operations all impacting the ability to transfer the learnings to construction.

There is a need for new and contemporary contribution that not only has a focus on the impetus for gender diversity but also provides practical solutions for building female participation and retaining their value in the workforce.

## Approach & Methodology

The principle method of research was to be auto ethnography to describe, systematically analyse, and make observations of the recruitment methods, cultural shift and dynamic of a business throughout the project which was aimed at trialling methods to successfully attract and retain women into operational roles.

Quantifiable and qualitative data collection was also gathered from interviews and focus groups with a cross-section of male and female employees currently and formerly employed within the Downer Road Services line of business.

### **Auto ethnography**

Field research journals were kept to not only record experiences but also analyse experiences. This method of research allows the researcher to retrospectively and selectively write about personal experience to understand the cultural experience. Auto ethnography is candid and exposes researcher's bias. It will record varying observations including, but not limited to body language of subjects, personal impressions, research methodology, or why one research path is chosen over another. This research method will serve as both a methodology as well as the research product.

### **Industry Discussions**

A series of discussions were held with a variety of women and men based on past experiences with the recruitment of women into operation roles and increasing gender diversity in their organisation. These discussions were held with people inside and outside Downer across the mining and construction industry. Many diversity experts, academics, and associations were also consulted. The aim of the discussions was to gather anecdotal information to assist understanding, normalise the research, and source ideas on recommendations.

### **Interview Data**

It was intended that exit interview data would be used of previous female employees in operational roles. Unfortunately, a statistically beneficial sample of interviews were not available,.

## Focus Group

Focus groups consisting of current Downer employees assisted in compiling information around how our current female workforce views equality in their workplace and attracting women to operational roles. The focus groups were conducted in an open-ended, conversational format. While a set of prepared questions were used to focus the conversation to equality and inclusion in the workplace and recruitment process, the group was not limited to those questions and where appropriate were specific to an individual's experience with additional questions included.

## Observation

Ongoing observations was required to determine the success level of the attraction and recruitment methods. Opportunities for improvement were also recorded during the research period with the ultimate goal of being able to retain the female workforce.

## Potential limitations

Potential limitations considered during this research project include;

- Availability of focused time
- Negative reactions from current workforce
- Business demands and interruptions
- Sample number of women in operational roles to research
- Key stakeholders perceiving potential criticism in research findings.
- Sample size compared to industry size
- Key stakeholders seeking to influence findings

How limitation will be addressed

- Well considered Project Schedule
- Senior management support of project to help transform the status quo
- Speaking with diversity experts and academics.
- Interview industrial organisations who have made progress in gender diversity.
- Caution used when interpreting results from the interviews and survey. These methods are intended to be indicating trends and patterns to complement data and should not be used in any other capacity.
- Marketing campaign targeting female success in operational roles.



# Findings & Discussion

The key findings in relation to the growth success of attracting women into operational roles have been broken into three areas:

## **1. Strategic Equity Imperative**

Addressing findings in relation to organisational understanding of the driver or the “why” there is a drive for a gender diverse workforce.

## **2. Business Infrastructure**

The findings relating to business policy, process, systems, and accountability frameworks. The business nervous system allowing, supporting, and promoting the attraction of women into operational roles.

## **3. Supply and Demand of Women**

The findings addressing what aspects of operational roles influence women to be attracted to these roles and the aspects that influence the desire of a business to attract women to operational roles.

## Background

Gender rhetoric started shifting in the early 1990s towards where it is today. Diversity is a key part of Downer’s executive leadership team, with diversity now seen as more than just addressing social inequality. There is a strong recognition that the diverse perspectives and representations a diverse organisation brings also importantly drives innovation and financial performance. It is also pleasing to see diversity recognised as a key driver in creating a more engaged and productive workforce.

Like many other organisations, the challenge to management is now, how to successfully and sustainably attract females to operational roles to make a real difference to the organisation’s diversity.

In February 2017, 5.5% of the operational workforces of Downer’s roads business were female compared to 22.7% in professional and support roles. 6 months later in October 2017, female participation in operational roles within Downer Roads has decreased to 4.2%. As of October 2017, in the Downer Road Services line of business, average length of service for women in operational roles is 3.9 years compared to 6.9 years for their male counterparts.

In the pockets of the business that focused on gender diversity in the 12-month period saw significant growth. This can be seen by these parts of the business starting with no females to growing to >30% females in crews in blue collar roles in just 12 months. The large growth in female operational employees in only a 6-month period demonstrates overall the activities in the bitumen business to attract women into operational roles have been successful. The key difference in this business compared to others within the group was a commitment to trialling initiatives to attract women, strong leadership, and accountability.

# Strategic Equity Imperative

## Findings – Strategic Equity Imperative:

- *Strategic business benefits of gender equality are a stronger driver over women's social equity. The case for women's social equity was found to prohibit change.*
- *A centralised diversity implementation plan is required to involve the encouragement of cohesive diversity initiatives (such as monetary incentives, female focused talent search and recruitment processes) throughout the business, to ensure supportive business infrastructure (systems, policies, and culture), and diversity learnings are shared through a purposeful communications plan.*
- *Manager intolerance of women in operational roles acts against action to attract women into operational roles.*

## Organisational Understanding of the Diversity Benefit

It was evident there was a very different level of activity to attract women into operational roles where the understanding of the benefit of gender diversity was recognised as a real and tangible business benefit rather than it being the “right thing to do” for society. The male managers within the business who referred to increasing women in the workforce because it is a social and equity issue rather (for example “I want my daughter to be able to work here” and “women should have the opportunity) than talking about the bottom line benefits had evidence of less effort applied in attracting women into operational roles than those managers who spoke about the benefit to business outcomes, problem solving, culture, production and financial benefits for the business (Divisional average increase of female employees was 1%, compared to vocal managers who saw 900% - 0 to 9 women).

This suggests there can be a bias as to the true benefit of increasing gender diversity and business outcomes. All managers spoke of wanting to support diversity but it was evident they did not always see the “what's in it for me”. In areas of the business where management related the diversity benefit to social benefits there was evidence of little attention or action to increase gender diversity and that it was not yet viewed as a business priority.

For example;

- *“Women with experience are so hard to find” (when I responded with “do we always hire men with experience” the answer was often no)*
- *“No women are not interested in the roles we have”*
- *“We don't have any facilities for women”*
- *“I won't get approval for the capital expenditure facilities required” (when I responded with “is the business is case for women not understood” or “have you requested the Capital expenditure” I got impression this was an off-the-cuff response not backed up by experience)*
- *“Talent and Sourcing don't give us any female candidates” (when I responded with “have you asked?” the response was mixed)*
- *“It's a lot of hassle”*
- *“Women on crews cause management issues” (usually referring to relationships with colleagues, harassment, social issues).*

Therefore, management understanding and acceptance of the advantages for business through an increased number of women in the workforce is a driver in the effective attraction of women to operational roles.

## Effective Diversity Implementation & Strategy

To fully leverage an organisation's capability to attract women to operational roles a cohesive strategy and execution plan is required. Such a plan provides a connection between initiatives, systems, process, accountability frameworks and the awareness to ensure the cohesiveness with the wider business strategy and prevent diversity efforts from being cannibalised by the organisation's own business infrastructure – it's what governance is. Evidence indicated this to be a challenge with the wide variance the business had success in attracting women into operational roles.

A diversity strategy and execution plan will provide clear points of accountability and responsibility in achieving diversity targets. The result of businesses that adopt and implement these tactics is that they more readily attract women into the operational roles.

## Acceptance of Intolerance for Women in the Workplace

There was evidence that some management believed greater gender parity through the increase in the number of women would destabilise their current male workforce. Some managers did not see a benefit in increasing the percentage of women at the cost of disenfranchising the current workforce and therefore they made minimal effort to increase numbers of women "the blokes on the crews aren't going to like it". Compared to those managers who were willing or did make it clear their unwavering goal of increasing gender diversity who increased the number of women in their workforce, "this is the way we are going".

It appeared some cases managers held back by their perception that the current workforce would not tolerate women in their teams which prevented them from taking responsibility for attracting women to roles. Managers did not always link between the responsibility of their role and shaping the culture to comply with the business's pillars/values:

- Zero Harm is imbedded in Downer's culture and is fundamental to the company's future success.
- We build trust by delivering on our promises with excellence while focusing on safety, value for money and efficiency.
- We collaborate to build and sustain enduring relationships based on trust and integrity.
- We remain at the forefront of our industry by employing the best people and having the courage to challenge the status quo.

A number of managers had not made the connection that the resistant employee is most likely to be costing the business in terms of cultural fit. Pre-empting employee behaviours such as "they'll get put out that a woman has taken one of their roles" or "the crews give the women a hard time" and did not sit in alignment with the company pillars values appeared to be tolerated by some managers. These managers had not yet identified the link between a culture that is not right for women is probably not the right one for the business to achieve its strategic goals.

It was found that managers who dealt with employee resistance and concerns about targets on women and educated their employees about the business benefits negated initiatives to promote gender equality being undermined. As a result, businesses with managers representing the corporate values attracted substantially more women to operational roles.

# Business Infrastructure

## Findings - Business Infrastructure

- *Advertising vacant roles increases the attraction of women to operational roles.*
- *Recruitment policy to require that applicants from diverse social groups (gender, race, sexuality, generations, etc.) are shortlisted throughout the recruitment process (including labour hire, external and internal labour and sourcing) to enhance the recruitment of women.*
- *Traditional communication mediums (such as emails, toolboxes, printed memos) and processes are ineffectual in ensuring messages cascade throughout the organisation (especially to operational workers) resulting in the corporate desire to attract diverse applicants not being heard and therefore not acted upon.*
- *Data capture, measurement, and reporting is required to obtain transparency over the effectiveness of methods of attracting women to operational roles.*

It was necessary to explore what business infrastructure within the businesses aided or hindered the attraction of women to operational roles. Business Infrastructure represents the organisations policies, processes and systems which establish how the organisation does business and therefore impacts its culture.

## Importance of Job Advertisement

Roles that are advertised are more successful in attracting women to operational roles than roles that were not advertised. Twice as many females were placed into blue collar roles and 30% more females were placed into white collar roles that were advertised than not advertised. As anticipated there was also a substantial difference between women being placed into white collar of vacant roles (23%) versus blue collar vacant roles (7%). It appeared advertised roles opened the opportunity to “non-traditional” labour pool and prompted or allowed more enquiry from Talent and Sourcing (recruitment) to search for women to fill the role. The roles not advertised tended to be filled with individuals already known to the hiring manager or colleague and created a “closed shop” as it limited recruitment to traditional solutions. It was also noted by several research participants the role of labour hire companies in increasing attraction of women to operational roles.

## Labour Hire Companies

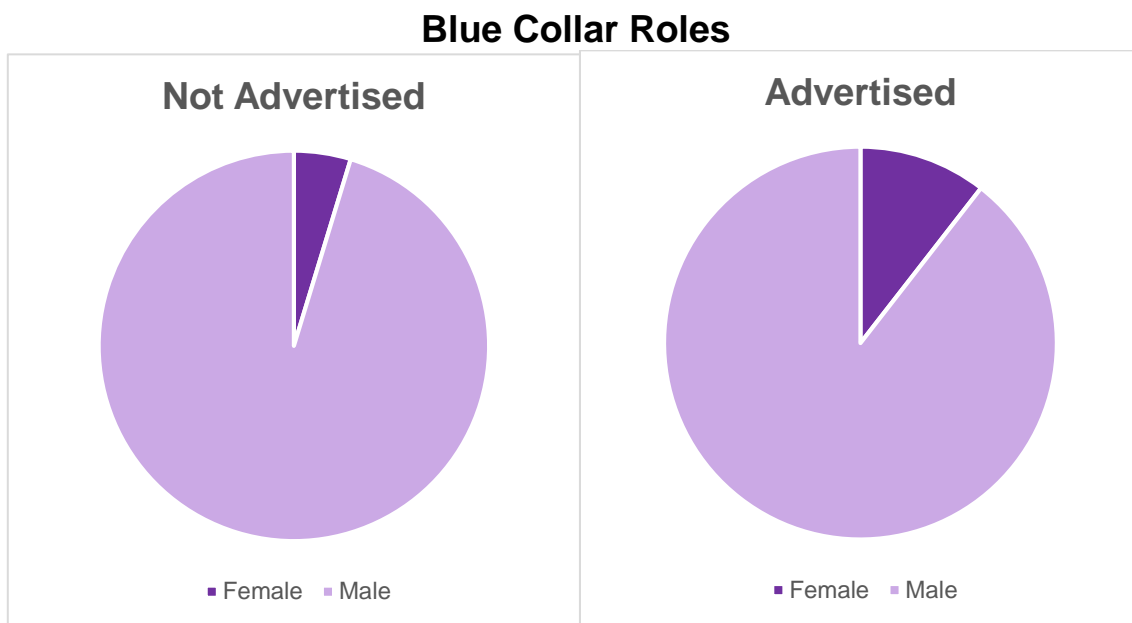
Labour hire companies are often used to as a recruitment pool for permanent employees into operational roles. Where the labour hire company was not returning a diverse labour hire pool it limited hiring managers using the traditional recruitment method (of current labour hire) to male candidates. The contractual terms with the labour hire companies often motivate quick placement of a candidate rather than to return other qualities such as diverse candidates or cultural fit. Basic logic and statistics state if there are less roles advertised there are less opportunities for women to be attracted. The data (Table 1) collected shows 66% of blue collar roles in the organisation are not advertised meaning they are filled through existing labour hire employees, from internal candidates or candidates known to the current workforce.

The qualitative research (for example “we hire people’s mates and guys that come to us through labour hire”) and quantitative data (Table 1) supports the correlation between advertised roles and the success of attracting women to operational roles. Human nature is to follow the path of least resistance unless motivated to do otherwise. By providing an option to advertise or source talent directly means people will revert to hiring from the same labour pool that is convenient, available and familiar to their management style.

**Table 1.**

	Diversity Data - Vacant Roles Advertised vs Not Advertised								
	Blue collar vacant roles			White collar vacant roles			Total Vacant roles filled		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
Advertised	18	153	171	185	513	698	203	666	869
Not Advertised	16	324	340	145	574	719	161	898	1059
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>477</b>	<b>511</b>	<b>330</b>	<b>1087</b>	<b>1417</b>	<b>364</b>	<b>1564</b>	<b>1928</b>

**Graphs 1.**



## Hiring for Fit

To elaborate further, natural human behaviour is to surround yourself with the familiar, which has foundations in evolutionary survival and is the whole basis in which the term “unconscious bias” is formed. It is human nature to hire like-minded and familiar people. There is a natural human trait to solve a problem... or in this case a vacancy, with a person known, or right in front of us, or known to a person we already trust. There was qualitative evidence (for example “the culture on crews is not suitable for women” and “the work environment not for women”) that potential bias was present during the attraction of women to operational roles by hiring managers and was only corrected by their direct manager providing the right incentive to consider women throughout the recruitment process. This “chivalrous” assumption made on behalf of women is meant with good intent but is damaging to give women opportunity. In the businesses where the managers were encouraged to consider women during the recruitment process the business was more successful in attracting women to operational roles.

## Effective Communication to the ENTIRE Workforce

An interesting discovery was a large part of the workforce below middle management (predominately operational) were unaware of the business’s desire to increase gender diversity.

But in case studies where the operational workforce was made aware they were supportive and willing to participate in attracting women to operational roles.

This discovery unfolded somewhat organically when it was suggested to a senior manager that the research was indicating the shift boss, supervisor and work crew level employees seemed somewhat uninformed about the businesses diversity targets and more specifically that they were eligible for the "\$1,000 refer a female friend" program. The senior manager immediately gave the directive that the diversity agenda and the incentive program needed to be communicated to front line employees. Two weeks later, female operational workers had increased by 50% as a direct result of the "\$1,000 refer a female friend" program being communicated to the operational workforce in the targeted work group. Before this point the businesses observed had very little take up in the incentive program.

The original communication method utilised email, posters in the corporate office. The follow up communication to the target work group was verbal. Effective and well understood communication methods that reach the entire workforce are required to attract females to operational roles. Communication blockages, especially to the blue collar workforce who have limited accessibility to online channels and tools, are not just an issue for diversity initiatives but for all business messages. It would be assumed the learning could be applied to the business as the use of the traditional communication methods would be hindering the understanding of strategic, production and safety initiative throughout the workforce limiting the realisation of business goal.

This demonstrated the benefits of gender diversity are not only in the traits and ideas that women bring to the table but in the creation of a business environment and infrastructure that can facilitate diversity of thought (in this case, ideas being communicated downstream and upstream in the organisation).

## Supply & Demand of Women

### Findings – Supply & Demand of Women

- *Public perception of Road construction roles is of hot, dirty, manual and unhealthy work.*
- *Public perception (versus the reality of contemporary roles) is prohibiting women being attracted to operational roles.*
- *Rewording advertisements to emphasis safety, "training will be provided" and "no prior experience required" is effective in attracting women to operational roles.*
- *Internal management rhetoric that the operational culture and work environment is not suitable for women provides a mental barrier for initiating activity to attract female applicants or to undertake any other activities to increase diversity.*
- *Using internal enterprise wide recruitment/human resource databases for sourcing applicants is effective in attracting suitable female applicants.*
- *Lack of flexibility in operational role working conditions is unattractive to a lot of women.*
- *Providing incentives to internal operational workforces to use their network is an effective way to attract women.*
- *Management are more comfortable about women in operational roles when they know they will not be the only one in a work team due to their perception of women being included socially and safety.*
- *Women currently working in operational roles do not mind if they are paired with other women (or not) on work crews.*
- *There are key operational roles that are naturally more attractive to women (e.g. traffic control) that provide an intake opportunity for other roles.*
- *Management believe lack of facilities for women means it is an unsuitable work environment for women therefore do not pursue attracting female applicants.*
- *Current female operational workforce sample state they are not concerned about facilities.*



## Outdated Views of Construction Roles

Speaking with people external and internal to the construction industry as well as anecdotal evidence from the Talent and Sourcing Team a barrier to attracting women to operational roles is the outdated perception of roles within the industry. The perception remains to be that construction operational roles are hot, manual, labour intensive and unhealthy work. This image deters women, and probably a significant amount of men from operational roles in the construction industry. When talking with the current female operational workforce they spoke of how their roles were not uncomfortable in terms of manual tasks or the work environment. They did talk about how many questions they get from public enquiry and comment about working in construction as a female supporting the wide-held view of the industry is outdated. The clear majority of women sampled within the blue-collar workforce spoke very highly of the company and their roles:

- *"This is the best job I have ever had."*
- *"It beats working in retail or hospitality and a get paid more."*
- *"I hated working in administration, here I get to work outside."*
- *"Every day is different."*
- *"I love the flexibility."*
- *"I love talking to the general public, and we probably do it better than the blokes."*

It is well documented women are not inclined to apply roles unless perceive that they comply with the majority of the advertised requirements which is supported through this research. Current female operational employees and talent and sourcing suggest that women are more inclined to apply for operational roles when there is explicit communication stating, "we will train you" and "no prior experience is required". Many of the female workers within the operational workforce spoke about their reluctance to apply for a role if they had not read or had explained to them that training would be provided and they did not need experience. Many of the women were recruited because they had heavy rigid vehicle licences (truck license) and they related that they had the licence for quite some time but companies were reluctant to employ them because of their lack of experience. This experience had reinforced the reluctance to apply for roles unless communication indicated that training would be provided and experience was not required.

While women maybe disinclined to apply, management perceptions also undermined. Managers who felt the culture and environment was not suitable for women were undertaking less activities (if any) to attract women to operational roles. It was apparent that not only did the public have skewed perceptions of the industry but managers within the industry did as well. Managers who described the culture of the current workforce as unfit for women often drew parallels to women in their lives (mothers, sisters, wives/partners, daughters, etc.). This indicated also a lack of ownership on creating an inclusive culture... if it's not right to do or say in front of a women it's probably just not right in the workplace.

As mentioned above, it was interesting women in operational roles who were interviewed were very positive about their role and spoke very highly of their experience and the company. Those who sighted a negative or unacceptable experience (when viewed through the company values and policies) had appeared more than comfortable after their own or their manager's correction of the issue. Though not the focus of this research, it is important to note that this is where white collar operational female employees differed considerably to their female operational peers sighting issues of inequity and inappropriate behaviour. The white-collar women appeared a lot more reluctant to raise and escalate issues. One could assume the white-collar women's experience is due to white collar/professional roles (compared to operational roles) are a lot less structured in terms of pay, development, career path ways, role content, and deliverables in addition to the women probably being more aware of what is defined as acceptable behaviour.

## **Industry Wide Labour Shortage**

It is interesting in a reported industry wide labour shortage that the construction industry has not moved from this limiting thinking and established methods for fast tracking the training of people for the industry. Thinking that relates heavily to comments from many hiring managers stating, “things were already tough in hiring labour let alone focusing on attracting women”, rather than the realisation that they are currently hiring from half the population and hiring women is a solution to alleviating labour shortages.

## **Using Corporate Intellectual Property**

The Talent and Sourcing Team undertook a database search as an initiative to actively increase the number of women being attracted to and applying for operational roles. The roles required a Heavy Rigid licence and therefore the enterprise human resource system was searched for women with a heavy rigid licence and who had applied to any of the company’s divisions. The search proved to be very successful though did not result in a high number of appointments. The women were attracted to the role until the point the conditions of employment were explained. The most common point of issue in proceeding with the application was the length of rosters and travel from the state in which they resided (both cost and time).

## **Working Conditions**

Many of the potential candidates for operational roles withdrew their applications for vacant roles upon learning of the rosters (shift length, duration of roster, travel, etc.). The businesses themselves believed they were unable to provide much flexibility to entice the potential employees due to contractual arrangements with customers and union agreement terms that do not allow for such arrangements. This is an area industry could investigate further through collaborative think tanks. Interestingly, nearly all the women working in Traffic Control spoke about their love of the flexibility of their roles. The Traffic Control roles are casual, their location changes day to day, and finish times for the shift are rarely definitive. These advantages are what the women enjoyed. None of these women had infant, pre-school or primary school aged children and were vocal that it would be a difficult role to maintain as a primary care-giver to this age group. The women sighted that at the stages of their life (university students, no children, and empty nesters) the roles offered them a lifestyle. This highlighted the true aspects of flexibility in that it is in the eye of the beholder as what one individual finds restrictive another finds flexible.

## **Incentive Programs**

In operational workgroups where the “\$1,000 refer a female friend” incentive was communicated it was proven to be a very successful tactic. This is an encouraging sign as it may also help retention of the women once on board with some familiarity within the current workforce and it also assists breaking down acceptance barriers as the existing male workforce are “inviting” the women. For example, it was sighted by one manager that he had seen a lot of success in the past of women being integrated into construction and mining work environments more successfully when known to one or more of the current work team. From a change management point of view this type of incentive provides a fast track through the change process for the stakeholders – it provides a clear “what’s in it for me”. There is enormous power in such a program communicated effectively to operational workers in sheer scale of how many “talent scouts” are then produced for the company. The success of this initiative will be limited if roles are not advertised as the workforce will not be able to recommend candidates. The incentive is utilising the bias phenomena mentioned above by hiring someone known within the organisation and the added parameter of that person being female.



## Inclusive Culture

Many managers spoke about their concern of placing one female on an otherwise all male workgroup. Many of them felt it necessary not to start targeting the recruitment of women until they had a solution for placing at least two women together in a workgroup. Again, this raises question to the understanding and responsibility of who is to be the custodian of creating an inclusive workplace and/or safe subcultures within the organisation. There appeared to be a bias present; when asked why managers responded with the belief that females needed to have a social outlet, for safety and because they would then be less inclined to feel excluded from the male culture. What is interesting is that this statement suggests management see two subcultures are required for an increase in the numbers of women into operational roles rather than a singular safe and inclusive culture.

*...the two managers discussed how the professionalism of crews had evolved over recent times. It was stated most of the bias in the operational workforce was now more correlated to age (their view was older members had bias prohibitive to women joining them in the workplace). This threw my mind back to the previous day's comments in their management team's strategy meeting when the group discussed diversity and getting women into their work crews... "They're animals" was used in describing some of the behaviour of the work groups when working remotely. Yesterday, the comment had drew a giggle from myself, today I remembered a couple of experiences that I had when I worked in mining that resulted in me taking the comments with a little more consideration.*

*I remembered being in a crib room requesting some paperwork off one of the mobile equipment operators and he responded by telling me that the reason he had been admitted to a mental institute (which he had previously referenced in other stories) was because he had done very bad things to women and that if I didn't behave myself he would take me out back into the bush and do the same. At the time, I was young and probably did not respond the way I would now, I smiled, laughed and responded with "it's just bloody paperwork".*

*The second event that came rushing to mind was a day I was walking through a breeze way coming back from the toilets to my office. I had overheard the voices of young males at the other end. They did not have line of sight of me walking towards them. As I got closer I heard my name, a few steps closer and I got the theme... what they would like to do to me sexually to make me cry. I was mortified, but being a person not to back away from confrontation, I took a deep breath, ensured my body language was confident and paced forward, as I went past I gave a stern and assertive greeting "boys" with a nod of my head, knowing they would then "shit themselves".*

*I reflected on how I would respond with more authority these days, not from a place of concern for myself and my wellbeing, but because I feel more of a duty to my female colleagues and it concerns me greatly that any of my work colleagues would be treated like that. I have now seen, far too many times, the impact of both vocal and passive discrimination whether it be sexually based or from an unconscious bias.*

*I finally concluded that to effectively attract women to the industry we would need to demonstrate the positive changes we had made to our culture internally as well as externally. I also challenged the acceptance of current culture and the sense of ownership and responsibility of that culture.*

Equally as interesting, most women working in operational roles when asked how they feel about being a single female in a male work group most of the responses came back as "hadn't really thought about it", "don't care" and "I like this job because I prefer working with males". This posed an area for further study and thought – is it that women are not worried, or is it just the sample that currently work in operational roles? Or are women expected and conditioned to accept the status quo? Would multiple numbers of women on a crew attract more women from the public to apply? Or is this concern in itself indicative they would not enjoy the role and work environment?

On the other hand, this is only an issue whilst building the first intake of women to improve the gender balance. When gender balance exists, single women will not be alone in a workgroup. It was evident more operational roles were understood or easily translatable after experience compared with first entering the industry. Operational roles of this nature had higher ratios of women placed in them and more women attracted to applying. Many women in other roles had started in the industry in these types of roles before progressing to other less visible and understood roles after they gained greater insight to the industry and career options.

## Facilities for Women

Facilities for women in the work environment created a great deal of interesting discussion. Most managers sighted the lack of facilities (access to toilets, female only toilets, female only showers) meant it was an unsuitable environment for women and therefore they haven't pursued attracting female applicants. When asked about sourcing facilities they sighted the difficulty in getting capital expenditure for the toilets. None of the managers had applied for capital expenditure for women's toilets. When the General Manager who achieved >30% females on his blue-collar crews was faced with female workers with no toilet he responded instantly with "you just raise a bloody purchase order... its \$3000!" and "we should have toilets anyway!".

Again, when the current female operational workforce was asked they did not express concern about facilities. Interestingly, when suggested that the company provide toilets they were concerned about the hygiene of the toilets and who would be responsible for their cleaning... "we will get stuck with the cleaning of the toilets". They, like their male colleagues, accepted that they would be flexible in finding facility solutions. When asked about the Occupational Health and Safety requirement to provide toilets the responses indicated the requirement was not understood. It should be stated; the sample of current operational workforce is not indicative of the entire potential labour pool for female operational workers. It is possible the industry would attract and retain more women if the facilities were easier to access – it is an area that requires further investigation.

It is interesting when these findings are overlaid with McKinsey & Co's latest research in the area of gender equity, when from their survey of more than 130 companies and over 34,000 men and women they found:

- **Employees question the plan of attack**  
*Companies have been trying to apply the same playbook of programs and policies for more than a decade. The vast majority of companies have flexibility, mentorship, and parental-leave programs. Despite these efforts, only 45 percent of employees think their companies are doing what it takes to improve diversity outcomes. The younger generation is even less confident—with only 38 percent of entry-level women thinking their company has a good handle on gender diversity.*
- **Commitment isn't evident in everyday actions**  
*There's also a yawning gap between what companies think they do and what people experience day to day. For example, more than 70 percent of companies say they are committed to diversity, but less than a third of their workers see senior leaders held accountable for improving gender outcomes. Over 90 percent of companies report using clear, objective criteria for hiring and promotions, yet only about half of women believe they have equal opportunities for growth at their companies. Without bridging the gap between corporate intent and individual experience, companies won't break the stall.*
- **People and organizations are afraid to address bias head on.**  
*Men and women, in all roles, shy away from calling out gender bias when it occurs. Less than a quarter of employees see their managers regularly challenge gender-biased language or behaviour. Less than half of all employees see day-to-day evidence that their company is worried about creating a culture that embraces diverse leadership styles. Though there has been a surge of corporate programs focused on unconscious bias, people aren't having the courageous conversations.*
- **Frontline managers need help.**  
*Change does not happen without the full engagement of frontline leaders. These are the plant managers, regional sales leaders, store managers, team coaches, and general managers who make companies tick. Today, only 9 percent of employees see managers recognized for making progress on gender-diversity goals. Less than half of all workers see managers taking advantage of the diverse strengths of their teams or considering a diverse*

*line-up of candidates for open positions. What this tells us is that managers are either not getting the message or don't know how to manage differently<sup>11</sup>.*

Based on the findings of this research in conjunction with McKinsey and Co.'s latest research the recommendations are on practical solutions to enable easy and successful execution into industry.

## Recommendations

The recommendations have been structured in direct response to the categorisations of the findings and have been drawn from the construction industry, other similar industries, research participants, external experts and academics, and internal and external Human Resource Professionals.

### **Accountability and Transparency**

Two primary and critical recommendations based on this research are accountability and mandatory advertising all vacant roles. Accountability can take a passive form of reporting diversity metrics at all levels of management or to personally motivate in terms of linking the metrics to performance incentive programs. An incentive is required to disrupt our evolutionary behaviour continuing to hire in the same manner through policy that states diverse applicants must be considered at different stage gates of the recruitment process to drive personal responsibility to attract women to operational roles.

Mandatory advertising of roles ensures there are operational roles to which females can be attracted to. Without an advertisement there is no possibility of awareness of roles available hence the ability to be attracted to the role. Advertisements should be tailored to attract a female audience especially in roles that have been identified as feeder roles. When Human Resource practices support the creation of a workforce that has the skills needed to turn diversity into an advantage, diversity is more likely to lead to positive performance outcomes<sup>12</sup>.

### **Image Problem and All of Industry Response**

The industry at large needs to act to address its image through joint industry initiatives and campaigns combining companies, industry bodies and unions to modernise the view of the industry. Specifically, designed programs (similar to that in the defence and mining industries) that demonstrate the benefits of working in the industry for females would be beneficial in correcting the image of the industry. Women participating in operational roles spoke about being attracted to these roles because they were outdoor, practical, adventurous, challenging, no need to take work or worries home, and paid well. These are all easily communicated concepts to the wider public in attracting more women to operational roles.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/leadership/time-for-a-new-gender-equality-playbook>

<sup>12</sup> <http://researchwriting2012.pbworks.com/w/file/attach/59874205/Diversity.pdf>

### Recommendations – Strategic Equity Imperative:

- *Workforce communication about the business imperative & benefits of diversity (senior leaders regularly voicing it as a priority).*
- *Leaders create accountability mechanisms (such as reviews, KPIs, links to incentive programs) and ask teams what they are doing differently to ensure diversity within their work teams (especially during talent sourcing process).*
- *A business wide diversity strategy and action plan is implemented and integrated within the wider talent and sourcing strategy.*
- *Responsibilities and accountabilities for diversity activities and KPIs are assigned, communicated, managed and cascaded throughout the organisational tiers (using identified successful communication mediums, and technology).*
- *Educate and develop business leaders to understand their responsibility for building an inclusive culture that adheres to organisational values, pillars and strategy achievement (building new company).*
- *Implement inclusive leadership training.*
- *Empower leaders to make a stand on "that is not the culture we want here".*

### Recommendations – Business Infrastructure

- *Advertise all roles (internal and external) to ensure they are widely communicated which will allow applicant diversity.*
- *Ensure all role advertisements and job descriptions are reviewed for bias.*
- *Create stage gates in the recruitment process to ensure diverse applicants must be considered throughout the recruitment process and to drive personal accountability to attract women.*
- *Provide access to training for applicants that meet cultural fit and capability role needs but not qualification needs.*
- *Effective communication mediums need to be identified, mandated, tested and retested for ongoing effectiveness to ensure messages reach all parts of the business (positive affirmation of messages).*
- *Review processes and policies to ensure they allow for and promote diversity.*
- *Establish metrics for the Talent and Sourcing Team and hiring managers to drive the sourcing of women to operational roles.*
- *Design and implement processes and system to collect relevant data to measure effectiveness and performance of initiatives and businesses.*

## Recommendations – Supply & Demand of Women

- *Create and launch a campaign of videos and pictures of short stories of women learning roles, what they like about their job, explaining the job and the benefits.*
- *Use in social media (internal and external to the organisation), and exploit by encouraging workforce to share the marketing material and to add comments to their stories.*
- *Engage industry organisations to support and use diversity marketing material.*
- *Engage Unions to contribute to changing perceptions of the operational roles by sending a strong message about the ability of women to perform in operational roles.*
- *Provide training to Talent & Sourcing on unconscious bias (and coaching for hiring managers), as well as hiring for capability (rather than traditional metrics).*
- *Design and implement "sales pitch" briefs for the organisation and for roles targeting women (using language and topics that research has proven to appeal to women) to be used by Talent and Sourcing, as well as labour hire agencies when recruiting.*
- *Mandate that advertising for vacancy uses gender neutral language.*
- *Design and implement role brief templates to ensure the capability, characteristics, cultural fit required are understood and recruited accordingly to mitigate bias.*
- *Establish a "scholarship" program for women entering into operational roles (trades, tickets and licenses).*
- *Form partnerships with schools, training providers, job agencies, TAFEs to use as intakes for women into operational roles.*
- *Specifically, and prominently advertise when no previous experience or training is required.*
- *Specifically, and prominently advertise where training will be provided.*
- *Use contemporary practices for advertising roles (not by role titles).*
- *Contractually motivate labour hire companies through performance and service agreements to provide diverse applicants.*
- *Communicate stories about women in operational roles and men supporting a diverse work environment to management to inform what conditions women are comfortable with rather than making assumptions.*
- *Provide inclusive management and unconscious bias training to management.*
- *Empower managers to accept that workplace conditions and culture is their responsibility to change.*
- *Implement recruitment processes that mandate a number of diverse applicants at identified stage gates of the recruitment process.*
- *Promote the use of internal "talent" databases for recruitment and talent management (or mandate).*
- *Ensure thorough records are kept in the system of all potential, present and past employees that interact with the business to provide data.*
- *Identify roles that could accommodate "school shifts" or other flexible arrangements & advertise as such.*
- *Work with clients and unions to include flexible conditions within EBAs to encourage diversity.*
- *Create working groups/think tanks on how to structure operational roles to be more flexible.*
- *Implement "Refer a Female Friend" incentive program.*
- *Ensure promotion & communication of diversity incentives, initiatives and messages reach the operational workforce.*
- *Demystify whether female candidates for operational roles require other women in crews or not.*
- *Target key roles that are more widely understood and are naturally "appealing" to women to use as feeders into other operational roles that are less understood.*
- *Survey female applicants and current employees to identify if facilities are an issue.*
- *Analyse the cost/benefits of increasing toilet facilities.*
- *Create a working group think tank to identify healthier (physical and mental) work environments for our operational workshop.*
- *Research Australian Occupational Health and Safety workplace legislation & standards for providing toilets in the workplace.*



# Conclusion

Setting companies' diversity priorities to form an imperative for change is required for internal management to undertake activities to attract women into operational roles. Cascading reporting from executive to crew level on gender diversity is required to disrupt the status quo and to change the view of who is accountable for identifying solutions to the perceived challenges in increasing gender diversity.

By assigning gender diversity targets to all levels of the organisation the entire workforce is motivated to engage in improving everyday work culture as well as encouraging and persuading the execution of the gender diversity agenda, promoting the cultivation of fresh ideas to attract and retain women and generating personal ownership and action.

Although, seemingly obvious, advertising all roles is the first step in transforming the status quo of the operational employee. Plain and simple, if the role is not communicated there is no way for female employees outside the current male pool to have access to the necessary information required for attraction to the role.

The research itself reinforced the benefits of gender diversity not only being the value women bring but also that gender diversity is somewhat of a leading indicator of an industry or organisations ability to facilitate innovation and growth, change robustness, and resilience in the broader context of business success. An organisation that has the culture and infrastructure that allows the success of gender diversity is the same one that allows long term business success.

As McKinsey and Co. reported recently to change the diversity playbook from gender rhetoric to tangible change uncompromising execution, fresh bold thinking, and courageous leadership would be required of organisations<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/leadership/time-for-a-new-gender-equality-playbook>

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