

Female engineers still discriminated against

by Gunilla Burrowes and Mark Toner

Fifty one per cent of female engineers attending a series of presentations and workshops for female engineers around the country believe that their career to date has suffered due to the simple fact that they are women.

This is shocking.

The data was collected by consultants Gender Matters in presentations over a 15 month period in four states and the ACT. Participants were asked the question: *Do you think your career to date as an engineer has suffered because you are female?* The results are presented in the chart.

The resulting 51% who thought their gender had caused their career to suffer could be low as many might not recognise or want to admit to being discriminated against or remember adverse career incidents, but this figure could also be high as it reflects a one-sided view of participants' personal opinions of past incidents. However, the fact that so many female engineers clearly felt that their career has suffered solely because of their gender is both surprising and alarming.

From a total of 229 respondents, 116 female engineers believe discrimination is alive and well in the workplace and have personally felt its impact. Typical comments from respondents covered issues such as:

- slower career growth compared with their male peers due to being overlooked, and needing to constantly argue their case for advancement
- not being taken seriously or being asked to contribute in the same way that male engineers were treated
- not being involved in, or invited to, sporting or other 'male' activities where networks are strengthened and work decisions often made
- balancing family duties with career demands – the 'double burden' that many women and few men carry.

As expected, the percentage of yes responses increased

with years of experience, with a shocking 80% of respondents who have worked for 18 to 20 years believing their career has been impacted adversely. If this isn't disturbing enough, the fact that 28% believed that they had experienced discrimination in their first two years of work is even more appalling.

Unfortunately, these data are consistent with the results of previous EA surveys of members: the 2002 *Careers Review of Engineering Women* (CREW) which reported 50% of female engineers believing they had suffered



discrimination, harassment and paternalism, and the 2008 *CREW Revisited in 2007 The Year of Women in Engineering* which reported that 42% of female engineers believed they had suffered discrimination.

So progress in reducing discrimination against female engineers has been unacceptably slow.

The engineering profession and industry are dominated by men, and it is time managers of female engineers took pro-active steps to ensure that their staff can develop their careers in a supportive corporate culture without undeserved gender discrimination. ●

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