

# Enhancing Women's Career Prospects

**Women need better career options and more control over their professional lives.**

Women continue to be disadvantaged in male-dominated organisations. Engineering and some parts of science remain heavily male-dominated, so female engineers and scientists will invariably work for organisations run by men, and some cultures and practices may disadvantage them in their careers.

There are at least five excellent reasons for having much greater gender balance in professions like engineering – equity (equal rights for women), excellence (using the most talented people to achieve quality), efficacy (accessing all available pools of talent), efficiency (not wasting the talents of educated women) and personality-type balance (more values-based members and less impersonal, analytical types).

But increasing the number of women attracted to engineering and science is just the start of the process. Once women are trained and working within these professions, they are being challenged by workplace cultures and practices that in some cases favour men, alienate women, and cause women to leave their profession.

To simply argue that corporate cultures need to change does not bring about the necessary changes. Women need a new approach to enhancing their career prospects, allowing them to have better career options and more control over their professional lives.

The aim of employees should be to get to positions and to do the type of work that gives them the most satisfaction and appropriate returns on their efforts. With a new approach, more women will be able to do more appropriate and satisfying work and reach higher levels of authority in their organisations, which by itself will effect change. Some of these women will then proactively introduce further change.

The problems many women face include poor career prospects, far too much discrimination, harassment and bullying, and large pay gaps. Women comprise 53% of all professionals in Australia, but in the ASX200 they comprise only 3% of CEOs and 14% of board directors.

Progress in rectifying these problems has been unacceptably slow. The solution is to attract and retain more women in engineering, the “hard” sciences and in business generally, and change the cultures to value gender diversity.

All employees play a corporate game, whether they realise it or not, and women can enhance their career prospects by understanding the game. To call it a game is not to trivialise its importance. It is a very serious game spanning a large proportion of our lifetime. Employees can enhance their careers by observing the way the game is played, understanding the rules (both written and unwritten) and then deciding if, and how much, they want to be willing participants.

Female employees need to understand that men and women can differ in key areas like decision-making, communication style, assertiveness, competitiveness and career management – and they may need to develop some new skills if they decide to play in the men's game.

To recognise the game and participate in it, all employees need to “read” the game and understand a number of relevant issues. To read the game, an employee needs to observe and decide:



- what are the rules (written and unwritten) of the game;
- who are the people with power (official and unofficial);
- what are all the relevant relationships;
- which men are sexist or uncomfortable with women;
- what is the culture of the organisation, and is there any gender bias (systemic or personal); and
- how are employees recognised and rewarded by management, and who is likely to be promoted?

With the right skills, women can recognise the corporate game and give themselves the option of whether to engage in the game and, if so, how much to play it to advance their careers.

But the real issue is how the game can be changed to generate gender-neutral workplace cultures and true gender equity across organisations. Achievement of this objective will only happen when progressively-minded men (and women) have the knowledge, power and commitment to effect such major change.

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