

Make an Impact – Women in Energy 2015

The 9th Annual Women in Energy seminar was held at the Royal Institute of Great Britain in the heart of London's West End on the 2nd March of this year. The theme of the seminar was what we can do to improve gender balance, at all action levels; individual, company and government.

Although gender balance has long been recognised to bring benefits to the workforce we have a long way to go before reaching gender balance in the energy industry. We have a commitment from many of the multinational companies to recruit 30% female staff, however, there are great losses along the career pipeline with only an 8% female representation on the executive committee (employees reporting directly to the CEO) of the top 20 companies in the Energy sector.

The day started with a keynote speech from Sami Iskander, the COO of BG Group, who clearly stated that we will not be successful in the energy industry until we crack the gender balance issue. One of his points was that blaming the lack of diversity on insufficient women graduating from technical subjects at university was too simplistic; depending on the country there are between 20-40% women



graduating with STEM degrees which should be a sufficient number and not used as an excuse. He advocated three aspects to realise improvements to gender balance in the energy industry. These were that recruiting women should be viewed as a challenge to be addressed differently rather than an insurmountable barrier, that standards to enable gender balance in the workplace need to be actioned as the norm, not as the exception, and that gender balance needs to be led from the top of the organisation, from the CEO and every level down.



Mary Honeyball (MEP) was the next to speak. She made the point that gender diversity becomes easier the more women that are in senior positions, but advocated for a more European quota style since change does not happen organically. She gave the statistic that earning levels are equal between the sexes until the age that women start to have children, but was hopeful that this might change with the recent law allowing parents to share parental leave. She thought that there was great potential for mentoring schemes within companies and a need in the UK to encourage more girls to study science, technology, engineering and maths at school and university.

Avivah Wittenberg-Cox then took the stage. She is the CEO of 20-first, a leading gender balance consultancy company. She argued that gender balance should be a true strategic priority for companies and needs to move out of the 'nice to have' category where it currently resides. She agreed with Sami Iskander that this needs to be led from the top of each company and shouldn't just be led by women for women, as the majority is always much better positioned to effect change than the minority. The key points in Avivah's speech can be found in her e-book [ONE Key to Gender Balance](#).



Following the plenary speeches, all three speakers joined Philippe Casbas, GM SE & SP Trading and Supply for Shell, and Samantha Rist, VP of Human Resources for Schlumberger Information Solutions for the panel session. This gave the audience a chance to ask the panel their opinions on specific questions. One particular question was on how Shell manage to achieve one of the highest gender balance levels in the industry, which was attributed to the company being highly networked and having a high level of remote working. Jens Alfs from BG Group, Barbara Heim from BG Group and David Mahoney from Futurestep, a Korn Ferry Company joined the panel after the networking lunch.



After the panel session, delegates participated in interactive soft skills workshops learning skills from experienced coaches on subjects such as conscious and unconscious bias, [work-life balance](#), communication and leadership. This gave the delegates a chance to reflect on their daily working practices and identify improvements to optimise their career journey.

Finally, the delegates split up into interactive breakout sessions to share their experiences and learn from each other's best practices. The summaries from these sessions are below.

Combatting unconscious bias

The discussion here centred on the fact that unconscious bias is learned, not hardwired. It's somewhat plastic. However, the general thought is that it takes 3 generations to equalise, it's not possible to equalise in 1 generation. Unconscious bias exists because commonness leads to comfort and trust leads to positive reinforcement. There are 3 aspects to unconscious bias. These are the values held by an individual which affects what they believe different types of people would be competent at, gender benevolence which leads to an attitude of protecting women from what is perceived to be high risk work and gender hostility which is where the dominant group feels threatened by the minority group.

The breakout session asked four groups a range of questions including, how best to understand what your biases might be, how can unconscious biases be altered and how can you help your organisation combat the effects of unconscious bias?

The general summary was that women should be more proactive and take it upon themselves to lead change, in themselves, and to champion change in their organisation, with reference to the business case. Women need to start at the personal level, not expecting others, or the organisation to change itself and they need to be open and confident while doing so. It's about ensuring the organisation is capable of changing the status quo. (e.g. don't make it personal, make it about the business).

This can be done in four ways. The first is through our language, as organisations we need to be more gender neutral, and we can all assist with this at various personal levels, and make suggestions to change corporate practice. The second is by being aware of bias. This can be done by first identifying where biases might exist through awareness workshops so that people have to really look at their own preconceptions and assumptions and through seeking opinions and benchmarking from others versus your own behaviour or assumptions. Once people are aware of their biases, the challenge is then to combat the behaviour leading from these biases. This can be done through running 'gender' moments, like 'safety' moments, as was suggested by Sami Iskander at the beginning of the day. Combatting gender biases can be made a priority and behavioural and cultural change can be highlighted to encourage this behaviour. Finally it can be made an explicit item in the agenda during promotion or recruiting processes so that each decision maker in the process is asked to reflect on whether they have let their unconscious biases affect their decision.

The third subject of discussion in this topic was how one can change on an individual level. This was about trying to turn unconscious to conscious bias, so you can address it as you can't address a problem you are not aware of. This can be done by putting yourself in your 'out' group. An 'out' group is anything you are not so you can understand the different culture. This can help to rewire an organization and change your own bias.

This final subject of discussion was on creating safe-spaces where different views or perspectives can be sought through informal groups where opinions can be voiced without fear of judgement or retribution. However, it was strongly thought that this needs leadership championing.

Flexible working

The discussion here started with looking at how different companies implement flexible working policies in different ways. The identified causes for differences were working with different geographical locations which sometimes implies cultural difference, whether management were also

involved in flexible working, whether there were trust issues within the team and where there are business needs for not being able to offer flexible working.

It was thought that men and women are not judged equally when taking flexible working hours. Both are seen as not taking their work seriously but it is expected from women and so if men work flexible hours, they are perceived to be judged negatively.

The advantages of flexible working were that the team can be more motivated, they can manage their time more productively and the organisation is less likely to have staff retention issues. The disadvantage is that it could have an impact on trying to arrange face to face meetings which are generally believed to be more productive. There was a general belief that flexible work negatively impacts the business but no proof of this was known.

Ideas for promoting flexible work included companies encouraging employees to make use of the flexible working policies by providing information and success stories and by corporations improving the IT infrastructure to enable working from home.

Mentoring

The breakout group on mentoring discussed the formal and informal mentoring schemes available in companies, what made a successful/unsuccessful mentor-mentee partnership, what mentoring can be used for and how it can be used to support gender-balance at all levels of the career pipeline.

The ranges of mentoring schemes available ranged from the informal where people feel they can talk to their immediate supervisor if they have anything they'd like to discuss, to the formal assignment of a senior mentor to every new-joiner with a set schedule. It was pointed out that most companies have very structured mentorship programmes on graduate schemes, but which end once the graduate scheme has ended. This is maybe not the best way round since graduate schemes are highly structured, but once they are over there is little formal guidance, so at this point a mentor is perhaps more helpful than before.

It was generally felt that a good mentor-mentee relationship must have both parties committing their time, trust and working as a team. It was also felt to be important to agree a set of objectives and a framework at the outset that both parties can readily commit to. Conversely, it was felt that a partnership would flounder if any of the above was lacking.

Mentorship can be useful for any number of short-term or long-term goals, for instance a mentor can support a new joiner in navigating a new company structure or help a mentee over a couple of years transition to a different sort of role. It was felt that mentorship was more likely to be useful when the goals were oriented towards the skills or personal development of the mentee, rather than specifically career-milestone oriented. For instance, mentorship is more likely to be successful if the mentee's aim is to improve her/his presentation skills as opposed to getting a promotion.

Mentorship can be used to support gender balance through the career pipeline, partly by helping women and men to achieve their goals and supporting them through career transitions, but additionally to bring senior executives on-board with the business case for gender-balance; schemes

where senior male executives mentor junior women could help them see a different perspective on gender-balance, as well as supporting their mentees.

Increasing the gender diversity in technical education

Many in the room coincidentally had the same childhood experience of being educated in an all-girls, where effectively it “had not occurred to them” that they shouldn’t do STEM subjects. This shared experience which resulted in the STEM educated women in the room speaks to the importance of creating a supportive environment for girls to pursue STEM subjects: from parents, to teachers, to colleges all the way up to government initiatives. In schools, the practice of companies sending engineers, scientists etc. to talk to school children was applauded, but the need to send



more relatable people was emphasized, i.e. a young female engineer might be a more accessible role model to a 12 year old girl than a 50 year old male engineer. The teachers and parents could ideally be involved in these sessions as well to promote better engagement at home and in the class.

For higher education, it was noted that most energy companies recruit exclusively from a very select few universities. Over time, such a practice would result in reduced diversity of personnel. By targeting a wider range of universities, a more diverse workforce in terms of gender, race, training, skillsets etc. might be achieved. Companies that bring school children in for science experiment and work experience days were mentioned as good practice.

To promote female education in STEM subjects on a national level, the Go4Set initiative was highlighted: www.etrust.org.uk/go4set. It was also suggested that STEM education could be made more attainable by providing subsidies or tax breaks for those pursuing STEM degrees.

Conclusion

Finally, the organising committee would like to thank everyone for attending the event and sharing their experiences. We hope that we can accomplish change in the industry by everyone doing what they can at their level of influence. We look forward to continuing the conversation (don’t forget to join the LinkedIn group [SPE Women in Energy Seminar 2015](#))!

The next seminar will take place in 2016 and it will be the 10th year anniversary so we are hoping to make it bigger and better. If you have suggestions, would like to sponsor or would like to be part of the organising committee please get in touch at spelondon.wie@gmail.com.