

{ EMPLOYEE PROFILE }

Miners in new push to recruit women

The resources industry is intensifying its efforts to hire female workers

CAMERON COOPER

THE days of male-dominated mining sites with lads' mags as the journal of choice are numbered.

In its place the aim is for a diverse workplace where high wages, flexible work conditions and progressive healthcare and childcare conditions woo more women into the ranks.

While it is no secret that the resources industry wants to attract more female workers, a new campaign is ramping up such efforts. Minna Knight, public affairs director at the Australian Mines and Metals Association, says the good news is that more women are already taking up roles in mining.

"From a positive perspective, 17 per cent of the industry are women and that has increased significantly over the last six or seven years. It used to be as low as 9 per cent," she says.

"If you want to look at it from a glass-half-full perspective then in my mind there has been some significant progress in an industry that has traditionally been very much dominated by males."

However, more inroads need to be made. Last month, the association launched the Australian Women in Resources Alliance, an industry and government partnership that aims to boost female participation in the sector to 25 per cent by 2020.

The federal government's Critical Skills Investment Fund is supporting the initiative.

Aside from the benefits of greater diversity in the workforce, the push to attract more women into resources is designed to help alleviate a national talent crisis that is set to get worse. Figures from workforce specialist Piterew Consultants indicate demand for resource construction jobs alone will hit 60,000 by 2013. In addition, Knight says about 75 new resources projects will begin across Australia in the next five years, creating about 65,000 direct mining jobs by 2014. She believes employing more women will help rectify some skills shortages and create more dynamic and productive workplaces.

"It's been proven that if you've got a better mix from a diversity perspective then you actually get a better output."

According to Knight, the new alliance represents the first time all of the industry players, including construction, energy, resources, maritime and even remote operators, have joined forces to drive the gender issue.

"They've all come together in this group to just get a critical mass and push it out across the industry."

At the coalface, Knight says

issues surrounding workplaces cultures must be addressed to get more women into non-traditional roles. Mining companies need to focus on more flexible and family friendly rostering, while changes are also required to overcome challenges for women with children who want to work in remote towns.

Knight says the alliance will be working with local governments in mining areas to improve services such as childcare and healthcare. Resources will also be created to help companies adopt better policies to cater for women.

"Part of the toolbox for employers will be trying to understand how they can provide career progression for women who may want to go out of the workforce for a year or so to have a child."

So what is the attraction of working in a male-centric industry for women? Knight says the average resource industry salary of about \$120,000 would give many women and their families long-term financial security. She argues that women's interest in the sector needs to be fostered at a young age.

"Quite often you need to start getting (women) to think, at the age of about 14 or 15, about geosciences or engineering and also trades positions."

A mentoring program that pro-

Page 3 of 6

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motes science and engineering disciplines as part of a school-to-work transition will be an important feature of efforts to develop more resources workers. In addition, the federal government's initiative encouraging industry to "Adopt a School" and improve awareness of career options will be used to encourage women to pursue mining-related studies.

Recruitment advertising featuring women is another area on which the alliance will focus. Knight says it is important for women to see images of women working in the mining sector.

"Across the country now more and more employers in the resource sector (will create advertisements) where there's females and different types of workers projected in those advertisements," she explains. "It's about sending a message to the broader community that women work in this sector."

Positioning women in this way should demonstrate the depth of roles available to them.

"It's not just a pick-and-shovel show," she says. "There's journalists, there's engineers, there's geosciences, there's environmental officers, there's sciences, there's

zoologists. So it's about getting that message out."

Knight advises women who are interested in pursuing jobs in resources to think carefully about which area appeals to them.

The opportunities range from open-pit and above-ground mining of commodities such as coal and iron ore, to construction and planning, civil infrastructure projects such as ports and railways, gas extraction and alternative energy.

"The first thing to do is to think about what it is that appeals to you, what are your attributes, are you interested more in science or are you interested in communications, or would you be keen to get into more trade areas and be out on site."

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MINNA KNIGHT
PUBLIC AFFAIRS DIRECTOR, THE AUSTRALIAN MINES AND METALS ASSOCIATION

Page 4 of 6

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STUART McEVOY

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Page 5 of 6

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