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Rail Professional

Women of substance

Clare Burles looks at the reasons why rail needs to reinvent its image

Earlier this year, a company in the US faced an unexpected backlash after featuring an attractive female engineer in a recruitment advert. People couldn't 'buy' the idea that she was truly an engineer – some even stated that it couldn't be 'remotely possible'. Others accused the company of putting women off engineering through an unrealistic image, and attracting men with the allure of a pretty girl.

Isis Wenger, the engineer pictured in the advert, wasn't expecting the barrage of ignorant comments that came her way. But why was it so implausible for a pretty girl to be an engineer? What would have been more believable?

During a time that the STEM industries are experiencing strong growth, it is fundamental that within the rail sector we change people's perceptions of what we do and who we are, because we need a strong supply of talent.

If we're not seen as an opportunity-

rich, innovative and exciting industry, it's not great for business.

Shockingly, this prejudice against STEM careers begins at a young age. A 2014 Network Rail study shows that girls as young as seven have an unconscious bias against engineering, and by 14, many have fully switched off from it as a career option. Girls aged 7 to 9 were switched off by thinking engineering was too dirty and messy and those between 10 and 12 were worried that engineering is dangerous and that they weren't strong enough. So we've got work to do!

Changing perceptions

The same Network Rail study also highlighted that younger girls were attracted to a career in engineering by understanding its social purpose, and those between 10 and 12 responded positively to role models in engineering. In order to change perceptions of a career in STEM industries, we need to showcase and shout loudly about all of the fabulous



women that work in our industries.

After being shocked by the reaction to her appearing in a STEM recruitment advert, Isis Wenger started using the hashtag #ILookLikeAnEngineer. Calling fellow female engineers to post pictures under the hashtag. Her goal was to help redefine what an engineer 'should' look

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like, to show that appearance has no bearing on their level of skill, ability and professionalism.

Within hours, the STEM community had responded. They highlighted their achievements, hobbies, families and demanded not to be judged by how they look. In less than a week the hashtag had been used 86,000 times, in approximately 50 countries.

This showed the world that there are plenty of women working in STEM, and highlighted the number of role models out there for younger generations.

Similarly, with the introduction of Lord Davies' target for 33 per cent female FTSE 100 boards by 2020, more and more women are in the STEM C-suite. At Virgin Trains East Coast for example, as we were recruiting for a new executive board in early 2015 it was crucial for the MD, David Horne and myself to get its composition right. This meant getting the right skills and experience within the team to get the business off to the very best possible start, but the gender balance was also important for us – not only to set an example but also for the innovation and creativity that a different perspective can bring to the table.

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Clare Burles is people director at Virgin Trains

Inspirational Women in Rail shortlist

As Women In Rail's Industry Report showed us, there is a real skills gap in rail. We all know that the industry is growing; about 1.65 billion passenger rail journeys were made in the past 12 months, compared with 801 million in 1997 – outperforming population growth. Rail's employment growth is also double the growth rate of GDP. To fill that gap, we need to inspire more women to join our industry. That's why Women In Rail is launching the first shortlist of Inspirational Women in Rail. The campaign looks to not only celebrate women in the rail industry, but also raise their profile within the rail sector to communicate the fulfilling, exciting and diverse nature of a career in rail.

We are looking to hear from the whole rail industry about women who go that extra mile, whose achievements are far-reaching or perhaps have changed your life for the better: a woman in the industry who has positively influenced you, your team or your career.

Nominations are open until the 25th March. To nominate someone, please visit www.womeninrail.org/news/the-most-inspirational-women-in-rail-cast-your-votes-now