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Women in rail | Adeline Ginn



Split the difference

Adeline Ginn discusses why we should all be working towards a diverse workforce

In recent years the tech world has made a concerted effort in working towards a more equal gender split, something that has seen women reaching senior positions that would have been unfathomable a decade ago. This progression is encouraging for all STEM industries and provides evidence of an appetite for equal genders in the workplace, as businesses increasingly recognise the benefits such as increased innovation and productivity.

Although the tech industry is generating brilliant attention to the importance of the gender skills gap and highlighting the scale of the problem that must be addressed, there is still a long way to go for tech and

many other STEM industries, including rail. In the rail sector, we need more commitment and collaboration from companies to stick their head above the parapet and pledge their support for a 50:50 gender split.

For the battle against filling the skills gap in rail companies to be won, we need to address the way we promote the industry to our younger generations and potential candidates. We believe this process needs to begin at home and in schools. Research by Surrey University has shown that parents of boys are much more likely to value engineering as a career for their sons, than parents of girls for their daughters. Currently girls in the UK are dropping STEM subjects by the time they get to A-levels.

There is an urgent need to educate parents and schools about the wide range of jobs a career in rail can offer. We need to show to our young girls that the industry is a modern and dynamic one where they can find a job not only as a track engineer or train driver but also as a project manager, lawyer, commercial manager or in a customer relations role, and that there is a department to suit everyone.

Strong figureheads

In conjunction with ensuring adequate understanding and promotion of rail, it is vital that we have strong figureheads in the industry and that we showcase women who have built successful careers in the railway. Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors, is an engineer by training and an advocate for pushing STEM education for young girls. She is a brilliant example of how women from engineering backgrounds can rise to the top in a spectacular fashion. The reality is that we don't highlight these achievements nearly enough. In August last year Women in Rail announced a shortlist of the 20 Most Inspirational Women in Rail. The aim of the shortlist was to help showcase the amazing work women are doing across the industry and the impact they have on colleagues.

Other European countries are far more successful than the UK in positioning engineering as desirable and sought after careers. This results in a more diverse and gender balanced workforce. In Latvia, Bulgaria and Cyprus, the percentage of women working in the engineering industry is 30 per cent. In the UK it's fewer than 10 per cent – demonstrating that we still have a way to go in making the industry a celebrated career for women, and with the large rail infrastructure projects reaching significant milestones in 2017, such as Crossrail and HS2, now is the perfect time to celebrate opportunities in the sector.

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Unconscious bias within STEM industries, including the rail industry, is something that further restricts the ability of reaching a 50:50 gender split. The bias and judgment people unconsciously make when taking decisions around recruitment - whether as employer or potential employee - affects gender balance in the short and long-term. This is something that Women in Rail is addressing by promoting a more diverse way of thinking at all levels of organisations, whether by raising the standards of equality and inclusion, creating the vision of a productive and inclusive workplace or designing interventions to spot and develop talent and, of course, align recruitment processes

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For rail to work towards a 50:50 gender split among its workforce, we need to be proactive in highlighting the diverse range of jobs available to future candidates and, at the same time, continue to nurture, develop and promote our existing female workforce.

Adeline Ginn is founder of Women in Rail and general counsel at Angel Trains



Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors: a brilliant example of how women from engineering backgrounds can rise to the top in a spectacular fashion