STEMMING THE TIDE
ADDRESSING THE ATTRITION OF WOMEN FROM THE STEM WORKFORCE
Stemming the Tide: Addressing the attrition of women from the STEM workforce
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"For Australian organisations .. maximising the potential of both male and female employees is crucial for increasing productivity and securing future growth. The Workplace Gender Equality Agency’s gender equality indicators have found that while 45% of Australian employers have policies on flexible work, and family and caring responsibilities, only about 13% have a strategy for implementing such policies. Over half .. have a standalone gender equality policy, but only 7% have a gender equality strategy. Women’s representation is low at management levels, with women comprising around 26% of the top three layers of the management hierarchy in Australian organisations with 100 or more employees. Pursuit of flexible work practices and promotion of gender equity needs to be implemented in a more strategic, integrated and sustainable way .. to have real effect at the workplace level.


In realising Australia’s innovation and productivity potential, we are all agreed that ensuring our science, engineering, information technology and mathematics (STEM) capability into the future is the main game.

Addressing the underrepresentation of women in STEM is a long-term workforce development strategy that will play a major part in ensuring this capability.

Australia’s future economic prosperity depends on it.

There is no doubt that encouraging greater numbers of women and girls to undertake STEM courses at university and STEM subjects at secondary school, addressing the attrition of women from these subjects and courses, doing road shows and sponsoring STEM competitions in schools are vital to addressing the underrepresentation of women in STEM. The problem is that this approach belies the complexity of the situation and is at best only half the story.

Addressing the attrition of women from the STEM workforce is the vital second half of the equation in creating a sustainable STEM workforce over the longer-term. Removing the obstacles, barriers and biases which operate as disincentives for women’s remaining in the STEM workforce is just as fundamental as increasing the participation of women and girls in STEM education.

So, as well as efforts to encourage women and girls into STEM fields, an effective long-term solution will require addressing the complex range of factors that operate to disadvantage women in employment generally, as well as the factors particular to the STEM workforce that operate to create disadvantage and lead to the attrition of women from the sector.

The Professionals Australia Women in STEM report found that almost a third of respondents expected to leave their profession within five years.¹

The loss of so many professional women from the STEM workforce would be a significant waste of expertise, talent and investment. It is critical that the community, employers and policymakers recognise the need to not only to increase the participation of women and girls in STEM education but for initiatives at the enterprise level that will ensure professional women are able to remain in STEM as they move throughout their careers.

Only then can we address the attrition of women that threatens the sustainability of the STEM workforce – only with such a commitment can we expect any real shift to fully and fairly exploiting our STEM talent base. A failure to do so would represent a failure to realise the dividend from the considerable investment in STEM education and training for professional women.

Looking at ways to address the attrition of professional women from the STEM workforce should be a national priority. Because of the extraordinary range of STEM workplaces, roles and functions, there’s certainly no one-size-fits-all approach. The aim of developing this guide is not to tell others how it should be done. Rather, it is intended to provide a resource that identifies some of the options for addressing the attrition of professional women from the STEM workforce at the enterprise level.

When organisations are ready for change, we want to work cooperatively and collaboratively with them to, in the words of the WGEA report, implement gender equity in the workplace in a strategic, integrated and sustainable way.

Chris Walton
Professionals Australia CEO
INTRODUCTION

Despite the vital role that STEM professionals play in business and industry, women remain significantly underrepresented compared with their male counterparts in STEM. Across the board, women are underrepresented as a proportion of qualified STEM graduates, as a proportion of STEM staff in the workplace, and as a proportion of employees in higher-paid positions.

The latest OECD data show that just over 30 per cent of tertiary qualifications were awarded to women in STEM fields in OECD countries. In Australia, 33 per cent of STEM tertiary qualifications were awarded to women. The differential persists in the workforce with only 28 per cent of the employed STEM-qualified Australian workforce aged 15 years and over being female compared to 55 per cent for all fields in the tertiary qualified population.

The workforce participation figure stood at 14 and 86 per cent for females and males respectively in engineering and related technologies, and 25 and 75 per cent respectively for females and males in information and communications technology. There was less disparity in the natural and physical sciences where females comprised 47 per cent of the workforce compared with 53 per cent males, and in Pharmacy, women comprised 56 per cent of the workforce.

Even among those women who are both qualified and employed in STEM roles, representation in management and higher-paid roles remains low. Only 12% of women in STEM fall into the top income bracket (above $104,000), while 32% of males are employed in this bracket.

Research shows that 75 per cent of the fastest growing occupations require STEM skills and that Australian employers report experiencing difficulties recruiting STEM-qualified graduates and staff.

Professionals Australia research has shown how far we still have to go to ensure that professional workplaces are equitable, family-friendly and safe. Despite demand for STEM skills and the difficulties that employers face in recruiting and retaining key STEM staff, strategies to attract, retain and promote women professionals may be hampered by cultural barriers, inflexible working practices, systemic bias in advancement strategies and inequities in remuneration. While women have made considerable inroads into STEM fields over the past three decades, workplace practices have been slow to catch up.

Many of the barriers and obstacles to full and equal participation in the workforce are day-to-day core workplace, cultural and industrial issues. They must be addressed to ensure that all employees are able to reach their professional potential. As long as a lack of real flexibility and work/life balance provisions operate to entrench systemic bias, and while workplace culture continues to affect both men and women’s access these core working conditions, a range of cultural issues and practical barriers will continue to undermine the retention of women in STEM professions.

We hope this report provides a resource for those looking for ways to tackle entrenched bias in work practices, address cultural impediments to women’s access to advancement and undertake and/or act on a gender pay gap at the workplace level.

Addressing the attrition of women in the STEM professions is not only a matter of justice and equity. Tackling the issues will be fundamental to providing for the optimal development and retention of women in the STEM workforce, and to fully realising Australia’s innovation and productivity capability at the workplace level.
WHY SHOULD THE UNDERREPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN STEM BE ADDRESSED?

The challenges we face as a nation are diverse and complex. Improving productivity and driving real innovation will rely on increasing the rate of women’s participation in the STEM workforce and ensuring the workforce is diverse and inclusive. A workforce characterised by diversity brings together a range of people who think differently and approach problems in different ways – research shows this creates a “diversity advantage” that generates a range of benefits including a strong innovation culture, a positive impact on the bottom line and incentives for professional women to remain in the STEM workforce.

As well as addressing gender segregation as a justice and equity issue, there is growing evidence of the advantages of addressing gender equity issues at both the national economic and enterprise levels. The 2015 report Women in the Science Research Workforce: Identifying and Sustaining the Diversity Advantage says that “Using (women’s) talents to the full at all levels of scientific and technological education, training and employment is an economic necessity, and an investment in Australia’s future national development.”

Game-changers: Economic Reform Priorities for Australia - a 2012 report from the Grattan Institute - estimated that increasing female workforce participation by around 6 per cent would increase the size of the Australian economy by about $25 billion per year.

The 2015 McKinsey Report Diversity Matters indicates companies committed to diverse leadership are more successful culturally and are 15 per cent more likely to have financial returns above their respective national industry medians. Workplace Gender Equality Agency author and Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre principal research fellow Associate Professor Rebecca Cassells says that for employers who get the gender balance right, known benefits include superior business performance, better governance, less likelihood of fraud and improved decision-making.

Research confirms that workplace diversity is linked to significant business benefits such as improved organisational performance, effectiveness, profitability and revenue generation. Diverse teams consistently outperform on innovation, problem-solving, flexibility and decision-making.

WHAT ARE THE FACTORS THAT CREATE DISADVANTAGE FOR WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE GENERALLY?

Some of the factors that create disadvantage for women in the workforce include:

- The gendered distribution of unpaid caring responsibilities;
- Organisational responses to career breaks necessitated by having a family;
- The entrenched underrepresentation of women in senior, management and board positions;
- The entrenched overrepresentation of women in lower-paid, lower status, less secure roles and/or in lower paid, lower status, less secure industries or professions;
- A gendered earnings differential or pay gap;
- Workplace cultures that stereotype, discriminate against or marginalise women;
- Limited earnings and retirement savings resulting from career breaks;
- A range of systemic and unconscious biases in recruitment and advancement practices.
Many of the barriers that face professional women in STEM are not unique to the STEM professions. They can however be exacerbated by:

- The precarious employment that characterises roles that are contingent upon grant-based funding which underpins most research in Australia;
- The historical stereotyping of STEM professionals as predominantly male or masculine;
- Disturbingly high rates of harassment and bullying on the basis of gender in STEM workplaces.

This guide sets out a range of approaches to removing obstacles and barriers to women’s full participation in the STEM workforce within a broader strategic context – they are entirely consistent with a merit-based approach to recruitment and advancement. To be effective, they rely on a commitment to building a strong and sustainable talent management strategy and STEM skills base in the workplace – not bypassing merit-based systems.
How can disadvantage for professional women in STEM be addressed at the enterprise level?

How can policies around gender equity in the workplace be supported by an effective strategy for implementation? What kinds of initiatives provide a basis for establishing or improving accountability and incentivising change? What sorts of things have been done in the past to support the kinds of changes needed? How can the process be an integrated and iterative one that supports ongoing improvement?

This section sets out some options for answering these questions, and provides a process and range of initiatives for consideration. Clearly there is no-one-size-fits-all approach and initiatives need to be tailored to the specific needs of the organisation and balanced with the needs of staff to create optimal outcomes.

With the following steps in place, implementing organisational gender equity as a strategy for addressing the attrition of women from STEM workplaces can become a positive, results-driven, iterative process.

Figure 1 - A strategic, integrated and sustainable approach to implementing gender equity in the workplace
ARTICULATE VISION AND DEFINE A STRATEGY

With buy-in from staff, articulate the vision:

• An inclusive and diverse workplace;
• Non-discriminatory organisational culture and workplace practices;
• The reduction of the loss of STEM talent; and
• The retention of the best STEM talent.

More specifically, the strategic goal is to develop and implement measures to:

• Encourage women’s participation in male-dominated roles and divisions, departments or teams in the organisation;
• Professionalise and improve pay and conditions in female dominated roles or divisions, departments or teams of the organisation;
• Promote pay equity and address any gender pay gap;
• Address workplace culture issues that differentially impact women;
• Ensure effective reporting processes and mechanisms for addressing sexual harassment; and
• Embed gender equity goals in management key performance indicators (KPIs);
• Provide training in diversity and inclusiveness;
• Address unconscious bias in recruitment and advancement practices;
• Benchmark progress with “best practice” peers;
• Provide access to flexible working hours provisions and other supportive policies to accommodate carer responsibilities;
• Develop inclusive career break strategies;
• Provide role models and mentorship.

DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN AND TIMETABLE

• Identify change leaders and allocate resources;
• Identify potential obstacles to change and mechanisms to overcome or mitigate them;
• Develop specific short and long-term initiatives (see below);
• Put systems in place to implement and reporting mechanisms to measure progress.
The most effective options for supporting a change in culture and practices are to (i) incentivise it and (ii) embed goals in organisational and personal work plans. This means ensuring reward systems recognise the achievement of gender equality initiatives and priorities where indicators are integrated in the KPIs of relevant managers and staff.

Implement initiatives

Because of the diversity of roles and areas in the STEM workforce, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to creating a diverse and inclusive workplace and reducing the attrition of women from STEM-based workplaces.

The following 12-point list outlines a range of options that, if adopted, will provide a sound basis for implementing a strategic, integrated and sustainable approach to gender equity in the workplace, and in turn addressing the attrition of female STEM talent.

1. Organisational accountability

- Conduct a workplace survey - a staff survey can establish a benchmark and database for longitudinal analysis and comparison, a basis for management to determine which initiatives will most effectively bring about the changes needed, and to set targets and measure progress towards those targets across the organisation. It is possible to survey the professional women in the organisation about their experiences, or to survey both male and female professionals to provide a basis for an organisation-wide comparative analysis. In trying to establish where women may be underrepresented and overrepresented, it may be helpful to audit carer responsibilities as well as the relative contributions of male and female staff to formal and informal decision-making processes and outcomes. The workplace survey can also be used to investigate the incidence of sexual harassment and staff perceptions of the effectiveness of formal mechanisms to deal with it.

- Conduct a mapping exercise to identify gender segregation (overrepresentation and underrepresentation) in particular roles, divisions, departments or teams, and in full and part-time work relative to carer responsibilities.

- Conduct a gender pay gap analysis - if an organisation reports to the Agency under the Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012, it is likely that at least some of the data that can inform a gender pay gap analysis already exists. Where possible, include a breakdown of base salary and benefits rather than total package to identify possible inequities in discretionary pay, and type of employment/engagement to allow a comparison of job status and job security. Look at gender pay gaps organisation-wide and by division, department or team.

- Make gender equity an organisational goal with accountabilities. Where appropriate, organisations can set up gender equity committees to develop and implement and monitor gender equity policies and gather data on progress. A distributed change leadership model generally works better in implementing broad-based gender equity changes rather than making a single manager responsible. Distributed leadership requires those with the skills and motivation to step up and to influence others to follow their lead when change is needed. These change leaders may not be in formal leadership roles but are generally well-respected by their colleagues. Change leaders are well-placed to identify roadblocks as the process progresses.

- Conduct training to convey the benefits of the diversity advantage to ensure staff understand that the action plan is consistent with merit-based advancement.

- Establish a schedule of report-backs to staff on initiatives and progress toward goals.
2. **Flexibility**

While part-time work can be a way of balancing work and family responsibilities, it can also narrow choice, limit opportunity, lead to women predominating in roles of lower pay, less job security and lower levels of responsibility and the stereotyping of professional women as less serious about or less committed to their careers. Normalising flexible work arrangements for both males and females supports a more equal distribution of unpaid care work. Flexible work arrangements should therefore be implemented alongside monitoring for these effects.

- Staff access to flexible hours, job-sharing and work from home provisions and time off in lieu arrangements can be considered.
- Provide flexible carer leave entitlements to cover planned and unplanned absences.

3. **Mentorship**

- Same sex mentorship at career transition stages – graduate, senior role, manager, leader.
- Better mentoring of early to mid-career STEM professionals with senior staff properly resourced to undertake it.

4. **Address sexual harassment**

- Ensure a culture of respectful relationships and workplace policies for dealing with sexual harassment.
- Encourage reporting of sexual harassment in the workplace. Studies suggest that fewer than 25 per cent of women who experience sexual harassment make a formal complaint.
- Provide a fair and effective process for staff to report abuse or harassment and mechanisms for addressing it. This can be supported by having an equity/diversity officer on staff where appropriate though this is not always effective of itself and needs to be supported by strong process and top down leadership on the issue.
- Women may be pressured to take part in sexist banter or risk being negatively stereotyped as “not a good sport”, prudish, lacking a sense of humour or as unable to “take a joke”. These practices entrench sexist culture, trivialise the serious issues that impact women in the workplace and operate as a way of getting women to sanction sexist behaviour and practices and should be regarded as a serious breach of sexual harassment policy.
- Investigate whether sexual harassment policies are working for the people they’re meant to protect and assess whether the reporting mechanisms are working. This can be explored as part of a workplace survey. Studies show a more accurate picture of sexual harassment in an organisation is gained by using questionnaires that list behaviors that constitute sexual harassment rather than querying respondents about whether or not they’ve experienced sexual harassment.
- Conduct relevant and ongoing anti-sexual harassment training.

5. **Provide role models**

The issue of senior female role models in the STEM workforce needs to be considered alongside the other initiatives included in this 12-point list including recruitment and advancement strategies. The underrepresentation of women in STEM clearly brings with it an underrepresentation of senior female role models and isolation, exclusion and feelings of not belonging at the decision-maker level have been shown to be important contributors to the attrition of professional women from the STEM workforce.

- Senior professional women that contribute to decision-making in the organisation need to be seen, and to be accessible, so they can serve as role models.

6. **Ensure access to meetings/important information/deadlines**

- Hold core business meetings within school hours.
- Ensure response deadlines are not outside school hours.
- Ensure networking and information-sharing opportunities do not exclude particular groups such as those with carer responsibilities (see also item 11 below).
7. Review recruitment practices

Unconscious bias expert Mark Toner details the following as the main types of unconscious bias:

- In-group bias, which causes us to be more comfortable with and favour people like us, i.e. of the same skin colour, gender, background, experience, interests or personality type;
- The halo effect, which causes us to allow the physical characteristics of others to affect our judgement of their other qualities, e.g. physically attractive people are more trustworthy;
- Anchoring bias, which causes us to rely too much on an irrelevant piece of data or belief, e.g. one of the interviewers had previously hired a woman and it turned out badly;
- Confirmation bias, which causes us to notice data and information which conforms with our beliefs and to disregard any which doesn’t;
- Availability bias, which causes us to grab readily available data to make decisions rather than use all available and relevant data which will take more effort and time to analyse;
- Bandwagon effect, which causes us to believe or do things because other people believe or do the same;
- Minority pool bias, which causes interviewers to evaluate more negatively applicants who comprise a minority of the applicant pool; and
- Social comparison effect, which causes interviewers to favour candidates who do not compete with their own particular strengths.

Unconscious bias in recruitment practices may play a role in gender segregation within the organisation and in an organisation’s gender pay gap. Training, while not a complete solution, has an important role to play including helping people identify their unconscious biases and understand how they impact their organisational decision-making. Implementing reflective practices such as, for example, recruitment panels discussing their own biases before interviewing candidates, having to hand a description of biases that impact recruitment, their causes and discussing ways for the panel to mitigate their biases can also play an important role. Accountability in decision-making and proper monitoring should become part of recruitment processes to ensure possible patterns of bias are identified, investigated and addressed.

Note that the practices of recruitment agencies should also be reviewed if the organisation’s recruitment is handled externally.

8. Provide equitable advancement opportunities

Bias in advancement and promotion practices may play a role in gender segregation and any gender pay gap in an organisation.

- Ensure access to skills extension projects for professionals including those working part-time.
- Promote from HR, administration, research, technical and marketing – areas or roles in which females can be overrepresented – as well as from sales and finance/line and operational roles - areas or roles in which males can be overrepresented. This means a commitment to a program of mentorship and building the skills the employer requires, not bypassing merit-based advancement systems.
- Promote women into leadership, executive and board positions as women at each of these levels has a positive relationship with declining gender pay gap. Again, this means a commitment to a program of mentorship and building the skills the employer requires, not bypassing merit-based advancement systems.
- Because career-defining years overlap with child-bearing years, professional women can be placed in an invidious position of opting for a career break or postponing having children in the hope of gaining promotion. A practical solution can be to promote to more senior positions at a younger age-early to mid-thirties. Again, this means a commitment to a program of mentorship and building the skills the employer requires, not bypassing merit-based advancement systems.
- A workplace culture of reward for working long hours impacts professional women differentially because they are more likely to have carer responsibilities. Considering only those working long hours for advancement limits the talent pool from which promotions are drawn.
- Review and evaluate potential biases in the performance management system.
9. Provide for career breaks and return to work

- Provide strong parental leave entitlements.
- Put arrangements in place to ensure staff remain part of the organisation and up-to-date on key decisions and changes while on parental leave to guard against professional isolation and facilitate reintegration on return to work.
- Formalise support for reintegration following a career break.
- Ensure women are not pressured into returning early from parental leave.
- Offer space for breastfeeding mothers to express and safely store their milk.
- Offer support to professional women to ensure their projects progress while they are on parental leave.
- Ensure any ‘slide’ in pay whilst on parental leave is addressed in subsequent pay reviews.
- Look at flexible work options for professional women in senior roles rather than demotion to roles with less responsibility on return to work after a career break.

10. Assist with childcare

There is a positive correlation between support for childcare and narrowing the gender pay gap.

- Provide support for men to be equal caregivers - more flexibility and financial stability to avoid forcing employees to make a choice between career and family – this helps address the polarisation of the workforce in full-time males and part-time females.
- Where appropriate, help cover childcare costs given that the high cost of childcare can prevent women from returning to work.
- Provide on-site childcare where feasible.

11. Provide equal access to professional development and networking opportunities

- Ensure that, where possible, training is conducted within school hours and/or advance notice given.
- Ensure business and research conference practices are inclusive.
- Ensure travel and professional development opportunities are available to those working part-time and offered to those with carer responsibilities.
- Ensure equal numbers of male and female speakers at conferences, workshops and on important committees.
- Ensure delegates to conferences include female representation.
- Provide a family room at conferences so that staff can sit and listen to conference sessions while accompanied by children.
- Provide support for professionals to take children and/or a carer to conferences.

12. Address gender pay gap

- Based on gender pay gap analysis (refer to item 1 above), consider the role of unconscious bias in remuneration practices both on commencement, during the annual remuneration review, on return to work after a career break and in performance management processes.
- Remove pay confidentiality – there is evidence that confirms transparency in this area contributes to gender pay equity.
- Conduct job evaluations across the organisation to establish relative work value.
- Make the criteria for pay increases and bonuses transparent to staff.
- Make it clear to senior staff that salary increases are linked to one-on-one pay negotiations if that is the case.

Monitor, measure and review progress

Reporting mechanisms should help identify at-risk and behind schedule initiatives, and point to roadblocks to implementation of the plan. Targets and timetables should be reviewed as needed. As with all change management, staff and management are part of the solution, not the problem so proper consultation to overcome roadblocks in processes should be seen as a routine part of implementing the plan.
Other useful information

The WGEA produces a range of useful publications and guides that include case studies:


Browsing through other organisations’ action plans can provide examples of industry best practice:


A range of organisations also provide frameworks for implementing gender diversity in specific areas of STEM. These are a couple of examples:


About Professionals Australia

Professionals Australia (formerly the Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers, Australia) represents over 23,000 professionals from across the STEM professions including engineers, scientists, managers, veterinarians, surveyors, information technology professionals and pharmacists throughout Australia.

Professionals Australia members are employed across all sectors of the Australian economy. This includes all tiers of government and in a diverse range of industries throughout the private and public sectors including Roads, Rail, Water, Electricity, Information Technology, Telecommunications, Consulting Services, Laboratories, Research, Surveying, Construction, Retail Pharmacy, Mining, Oil, Collieries and Manufacturing.
Endnotes


2 Roberts, K. (2014). Engaging more women and girls in mathematics and STEM fields: the International evidence. The OECD figures are from 2011 and include both tertiary type A and advanced research programs, accounting for Bachelor degrees, Masters degrees and doctoral research.


4 Healy et al., 2013.

5 STEM qualifications are defined as Bachelor degree level or higher in the Natural and Physical Sciences, Information Technology or Engineering and Related Technologies. Definitions as found in Contributing consultant report to ‘STEM: Country Comparisons’ project. National Institute of Labour Studies, Flinders University, on behalf of ACOLA. Australian Office for the Chief Scientist: Canberra.


7 It is on this basis that the Engineering, Science and ICT professions are referred to as traditionally male-dominated and Pharmacy as female-dominated.


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