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Hiring more women will solve the skills shortages in the construction industry

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With an increasing population comes more housing, commercial buildings, social spaces, and infrastructure. The Building and Construction Industry employs approximately 1,160,715 persons (Australian Bureau of Statistics seasonally adjusted data), accounting for 8.8 per cent of the total workforce. Over the past five years, despite employment in the industry increasing by 7.1 per cent, women currently represent 8.9 per cent of all current learners in trades and just 2.1 per cent of all learners studying a trade in the Building and Construction Industry.

The Building and Construction Industry is the second most male-dominated industry after the mining industry. According to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), only 18.1% of its employees are female. Women comprise just 2.7% of chief executive officers, 15.1% of key management personnel and 13.0% of all managers. These figures are all far lower than the national average. The industry also has a low representation of women in management compared with representation across the industry: 13.0% compared to 18.1%.

The traditionally masculine roles in the industry have continued to remain this way. Women comprise 4.0% of machinery operators and drivers, 15.3% labourers, and 3.1% technicians and trades. By contrast, they dominate the clerical positions, with women comprising 77.7% of clerical and administrative workers.

According to statista.com, the construction industry plays a significant economic role in Australia, producing around 9% of the country's GDP. The value of activity in this industry alone amounted to \$205 billion in 2019. The value of private-sector construction was significantly higher than the value of public sector construction. Combined, these sectors cover engineering construction work, non-residential building, and residential building.



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INDUSTRY SNAPSHOT

JULY 2021

Construction is the biggest provider of full time jobs and has the largest number of businesses



1,160,715 people employed in construction in AUS (May 2021)

307,080 resi/commercial builders

133,817 civil construction

719,382 resi/commercial subcontractors

8.8% of AUS jobs are in construction



Women account for 12.8% of those working in AUS construction



Women Building Australia

Engineering construction work, which encompasses infrastructure, was the most predominant of the three.

During the first half of 2020, Australia's construction industry was disrupted due to the coronavirus pandemic. The industry had seen a steady rise in employment since 2012, with the number of employees at around 1.18 million in 2020. In 2024, employment in the construction industry in Australia was forecasted to amount to 1.28 million people.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Building and Construction Industry has continuously faced a persistent labour shortage, particularly among trades and other skilled worker classifications. The shortfall created substantial headaches for many building and construction companies, generating project delays in some cases and making it impractical to bid on specific projects in others.

Despite evidence that a diversified workforce with gender balance will bring about higher productivity levels, improve diversity and inclusion and aids in employee retention, the industry has long struggled to attract the next generation of building trade apprentices. Female careers in the construction industry have remained shockingly low for decades due in large part to the discrimination that blocks women from entering and staying in the field.

It will be doubly challenged to attract more women and female apprentices given enduring misconceptions about the work itself and the added demands and challenges women continuously face in such a male-dominated market sector, from gender bias, underrepresentation, under-recognition, and discrimination. The predominant barrier is related to the perception of sexual harassment. Because the industry is male-dominated, women's values become the industry's standard, such as extensive working hours, competition amongst colleagues, and self-sufficiency.

Other ongoing issues faced by women include:

- slow career progression;
- the lack of recognition and encouragement from supervisors;
- difficulty in finding a balance between personal goals and professional goals;
- negative perceptions of women capabilities;
- absence of positive influences such as lack of mentors;
- being restricted to clerical/administration

roles;

- minimal recognition on project sites;
- expectations to mimic males' aggressive behaviours;
- high-stress levels linking to career;
- performing repetitive minor tasks;
- undervalued and low potential for career advancement;
- unfair judgement of training needs; and
- misjudged on performance compared with male counterparts

Understanding and alleviating the challenges mentioned above for women in the Building and Construction Industry will encourage more women to join the industry and advance their careers.

The release of last year's Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre/Workplace Gender Equality Agency 2020 (BCEC/WEGA) Gender Equity Insights Report proved beyond all doubt that the business case for gender equality is clear and compelling.

A more gender-balanced leadership in an organisation delivers better company performance, greater productivity and greater profitability. It revealed a solid and convincing causal relationship between increasing the number of women in senior leadership and subsequent improvements in company performance.

Appointing a female CEO, increasing the share of female key management personnel, and increasing female representation on its board led to increases in the market value of Australian ASX-listed companies. A company is also more likely to outperform its sector on three or more key profitability and performance metrics by taking the same actions. The findings of this BCEC report prove that gender equality is a commercial imperative and provides organisations with a competitive edge over their business rivals.

With vaccinations underway and increased optimism about the prospects for construction in 2021, there is no better time for women to consider construction as a long-term career choice.

From a competitive salary to a rewarding career, women represent an untapped potential to help fill the labour shortage.

The growing presence of technology creates many new job opportunities that women may choose to excel in. There are managerial positions available such as project managers, supervisors, safety managers and more.

Suppose building and construction companies are serious about reducing the industry's skills shortages. In that case, they may want to start lobbying State and Commonwealth Governments for increased funding not only to empower women but to help train and invest in an advocacy campaign encouraging women



that job opportunities exist in various fields in the Building and Construction Industry.

On 29 April 2021, the NSW Government announced it would support 3,000 training places for women in trades to help boost female representation in construction, manufacturing, engineering, transport and logistics.

The fee-free Built For Women training program will target women aged 16 to 24, female jobseekers, women at risk of unemployment and women in receipt of Commonwealth benefits.

NSW Minister for Skills and Tertiary Education Geoff Lee said the program would help boost numbers of women working on building sites.

"The Built For Women program is about attracting women to rewarding careers in trades industries that are experiencing skills shortages," Mr Lee said.

"There has never been a better time to re-skill or up-skill and take advantage of the employment opportunities arising from the NSW Government's record \$107 billion infrastructure investment, which is creating hundreds of jobs."

"Growing housing developments, new road and infrastructure upgrades, as well as the

new Western Sydney airport, are creating skills demands in manufacturing, engineering and transport and logistics, providing an opportunity for women to increase their skills and participation in the industry."

There are 154 full-qualifications and 408 part-qualifications available in construction under JobTrainer.

NSW Minister for Women Bronnie Taylor said the Built For Women program would help close the gender gap present in the trades industry.

"The NSW Government is committed to increasing the number of women working in non-traditional trades," Mrs Taylor said.

"Whether you're a female school leaver looking to pursue a career as an engineer or a woman looking to retrain as a construction worker – now is the perfect time to train and get started in the industry."

For more information, visit the Built for Women webpage (<https://education.nsw.gov.au/skills->



our industry offers. Women Building Australia is about making this happen by promoting the opportunities for women and employers and providing the information and support they need.

For more information, visit the Women Building Australia webpage (<https://www.womenbuildingaustralia.com.au/>)

As we move into the post-COVID recovery phase, we must ensure that women's workforce participation is not sidelined. Our economic recovery depends on women having equal access to

nsw/built-for-women) or call 13 28 11.

The Women Building Australia program aims to attract and support women to succeed in the Building and Construction Industry. Attracting the best workers regardless of their gender means our industry will benefit and evolve with new skills, ideas, and innovations. The business success of building businesses will be boosted, and more women can take advantage of the fantastic career and job opportunities

secure full-time jobs. Women and men must have an equal opportunity to re-engage and participate in the workforce.

Employers have an essential role in making this happen by ensuring the momentum towards gender equality is sustained. Employers must keep their feet firmly planted on the pedal to drive better gender equality outcomes. It is suitable for business and integral to our economic recovery.

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