

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Part 2: A Focus on Women

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In the last article, we focused mostly on people of color and other minority groups. Today, we focus on women. Let's start with some startling statistics concerning women in construction and engineering.

According to the Society of Women Engineers (SWE), "Of the U.S. Engineers employed in the engineering industry, 74.1% are white, 15.6% are Asian, 5.2% are Hispanic, 2.7% are black, and 2.4% are other. 12% of these engineers are women. The Williams Institute at UCLA estimate that 3.5% of the American population identify as LGB, and that almost half of these groups are not 'out' at work."

Of the women coming into the AEC industry, many leave within five to eight years. According to Harvard Business Review research in 2008, the main reasons women leave engineering are "hostile, macho cultures, isolation, mysterious career paths, systems linking reward to risk, and extreme work pressures."

From a great blog in Engineering News-Record (ENR) on January 3, 2017: *There's A Talent Shortage - So Why Are We Chasing Away Half the Potential Workforce?*, "A 2016 Society of Woman Engineers (SWE) study found that only 20% of engineering school graduates are female – and only 11% (it was 12% in a previous study) of the current engineering workforce are women. Furthermore, the study found that workplace climate is the reason cited by almost one-third of women leaving the profession."

A separate study, presented to the American Psychological Association (APA) in 2016, noted that nearly 40% of women who study engineering in college either never take an engineering job or leave the industry after entering the workforce.



Reflect on some of those numbers: 11% of the engineering workforce; 20% of engineering graduates; 40% quitting the industry – or never joining it in the first place.

And females comprise 50.8% of the population of the United States, per the Census Bureau.

Clearly, the profession of engineering is not attractive to many young women choosing college majors, and the perceived unattractiveness rears its ugly head for far too many of the women who do enter the profession. The SWE National Gender Culture Study found that women engineers who leave tend to do so after 5-8 years. And many of those who leave do so because they continually face barriers to achieving their career and company goals, often driven by a cultural lack of accountability at their firms.

In fairness, men also perceive this to be a huge issue;

however, they are more likely to just “deal with it.” One of the potential reasons for this is the lack of soft skills training provided to professionals as they advance in their careers. As a result, company cultures are driven by facts and data, not communication and development.”

It may be wise to have the following discussion concerning these statistics:

How does your company compare with the industry averages? Take a survey or ask HR. How many women do you have in your company? Is there more work to do to actively recruit more women? Do you have a diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging initiative? Do you have resources allocated to obtain the results that you are looking for? What about exit interviews? If women have left your company, do you know why?

Let’s take a look at the emotional intelligence side of this equation:

As a general rule, most women, because their EI profiles differ from men, tend to be better at collaboration. They tend to score higher in empathy and social responsibility. For an industry moving toward more collaborative project delivery methods (IPD, Lean, ILPD, CM at risk, Design Build, and Design Assist to name a few), development of higher empathy and social responsibility awareness is important.

Below is a graph of average EI profiles for 265 males and 64 females (52 of whom are in operations). Keep in mind that this is a self-perception evaluation, so this is how men and women perceive themselves.

You can see that men tend to score higher in competencies like assertiveness, independence, problem solving, and stress tolerance, and lower in emotional self-awareness, emotional expression, interpersonal relationships, and empathy. Women tend to score higher in competencies like emotional self-awareness, emotional expression, and empathy, and lower in assertiveness, independence, and problem solving. Think of how these differences manifest in project teams. Men and women tend to complement each other in terms of skills and development areas. Think of how the combination of these skills will help collaborative projects and help the industry with their diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging efforts. How much of these differences are dictated by traditional male/female gender roles? How can we overcome some of the biases on both sides? If males and females worked to balance their profiles, what do you think the outcome would be?

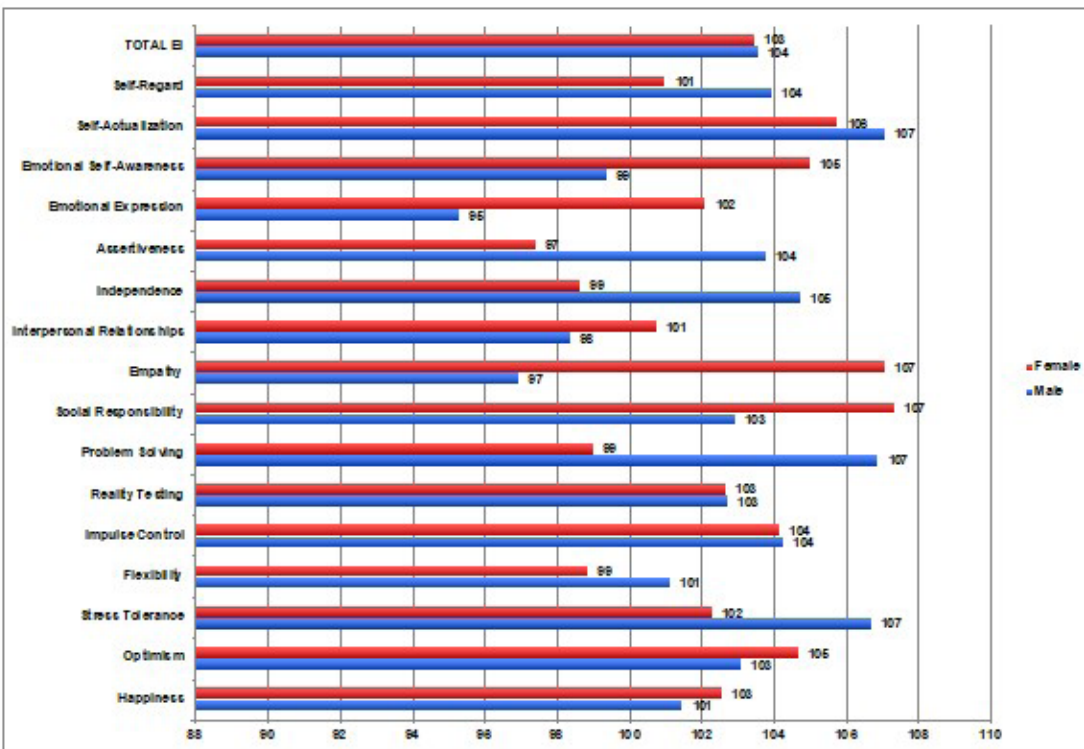
THE BUSINESS CASE FOR MORE WOMEN

There is mounting evidence that having more diverse and inclusive workforce and management teams are better for business. Look at your “C” Suite meeting attendees and see if there are mostly white male faces sitting around the table. Then, after you read through this Harvard study, you may want to think about deliberately attempting to diversify your teams.

In a February 2016 Harvard Business Review article, they found the following:

“When we examined the profitable firms in our sample (average net margin of 6.4%), we found that going from having no women in corporate leadership (the CEO, the board, and other C-suite positions) to a 30% female share is associated with a one-percentage-point increase in net margin – which translates to a 15% increase in profitability for a typical firm.”

Take an inventory of your current top management team or board. How many women are represented? If you would like to increase the diversity of this group, look at your organization and identify candidates who could step into these roles. Even if they aren’t ready today, identify them and provide them with the opportunities and resources to be able to step into these roles when they are ready. Be deliberate. Be conscious. Make it about performance and qualifications and be clear on the path and what it takes to get there.



DIVERSITY AND PERFORMANCE

Does diversity improve performance? The short answer is yes. Biases toward women can lead to hiring decisions that likely hired candidates with less ability because they were men. When you do this, you bring the overall ability of your organization down. When blind hiring results in more women who have better ability, your overall company performance increases.

In a Harvard Study on blind auditions for symphonies, they found the following:

“Using a screen to conceal candidates from the jury during preliminary auditions increased the likelihood that a female musician would advance to the next round by 11 percentage points. During the final round, “blind” auditions increased the likelihood of female musicians being selected by 30%.

“According to analysis using roster data, the transition to blind auditions from 1970 to the 1990s can explain 30 percent of the increase in the proportion female among new hires and possibly 25 percent of the increase in the percentage female in the orchestras.”

This finding begs the further analysis that without the blind auditions, orchestras were hiring musicians with less ability because of their gender. Naturally, the performance of the orchestra had to increase.

In a Stanford study on gender bias in technical fields based on resumes that were identical but had “male” names and “female” names:

“The results were surprising – they show that the decision makers did not evaluate the resume purely on its merits. Despite having the exact same qualifications and experience as John, Jennifer was perceived as significantly less competent. As a result, Jennifer experienced a number of disadvantages that would have hindered her career advancement if she were a real applicant. Because they perceived the female candidate as less competent, the scientists in the study were less willing to mentor Jennifer or to hire her as a lab manager. They also recommended paying her a lower salary. Jennifer was offered, on average, \$4,000 per year (13%) less than John.”

This finding begs the further analysis that without the gender bias in STEM work and research, schools may be hiring candidates with less ability because of their gender and not giving females the same resources to increase their value in the organization.

Is there bias in your recruiting, hiring, promotions, and salary? The latest data from the United States Census Bureau shows that women only make 79 cents to every dollar a man earns.

In the construction industry this gap is much less, around 95.7 cents to every dollar (NAWIC). Look at these processes in your organization and ask yourself if it is an issue. Ask several people and get consensus on whether or not it is an issue. If it is, brainstorm what you can do about it. One study in the UK found that the simple act of reminding people to “not be prejudiced” takes the bias down to nearly zero. But first you must recognize the bias and then take deliberate steps to eliminate it.

MEN VERSUS WOMEN BOSSES

Historically, in Gallup polls, most folks preferred male bosses over female bosses. In a 2017 article from Gallup, *Americans No Longer Prefer Male Boss to Female Boss*, the following statistics were found:

- » 55% of Americans have no preference about the gender of their boss
- » Men (68%) are more likely than women (44%) to lack preference
- » Women under 50 prefer a female boss; women 50 and older divided

We are making progress!

Are companies setting women up to fail? Are you putting women in leadership positions without the leadership training and emotional intelligence to succeed? Do you have a well laid out plan for their development and connect them with mentors to help them along the way? Women need the same leadership skills as men, and we must provide the resources for them and the encouragement and mentoring to get there. Review your training, development, mentoring, and career paths and be sure that everyone, including women, are clear about their path, the skills it takes to get there and the resources to obtain those skills.

I was speaking at a women’s conference and shared the stage with Carol Bartz, the former CEO of Autodesk and Yahoo. She was asked this question: “What about likeability versus credibility? Which is the most important?” She said if she had to pick one, it would be credibility, then she added, but if you’re an ass@@%*, you lose your credibility pretty quickly. The harsh reality is that women must walk a finer line than men with regard to their perception of leadership ability. If women are assertive, they are labeled a “bitch”. If they are compliant, they are labeled “weak”. When folks ask me about their woman project manager who “comes on too strong”, I always ask them if this was a man, would you be asking me this question? The answer for any leader, male or female, is to have the proper balance between competencies like assertiveness and empathy. And that takes training, application, and mentoring.

MORE SUPPORT FOR WOMEN

Women Specific items in the Workplace:

There are some simple things we can do to better support women in the workplace. For female ironworkers, there are companies that are providing nice, clean, portable toilets with sinks and feminine hygiene products. There are also companies that are starting to pay attention to clothes and PPE that are made specifically for women to make them more comfortable and productive.

Maternity/Paternity Leave:

Countries that provide maternity and paternity leave have many more women in the workplace. Sweden is a fine example. Sweden is not a very diverse country, but their gender equality is unmatched in other parts of the world, especially in the workplace and in groups with traditionally male roles. Forty-four percent of parliamentary seats are held by women, which is the country that achieved the highest rate without any gender quota. Eighteen months of paternity and maternity leave at 80 percent of your salary (split between the two parents) allows each parent to devote time to their children and not be penalized in their careers. This is applicable to gay couples as well.

Daycare:

What if we supported working mothers and fathers with day care and flexible work hours. When women have these resources, they are much more likely to continue to pursue their careers and stay with their companies.

What is your company policy on these types of support? Do you provide flexible schedules and support for you employees, especially the women?

Men Have to Do Their Part:

The Harvard Business Review Article, *Unmasking Manly Men* (August 2008), tells us that hyper-masculine work environments can negatively affect business performance. According to the authors:

“Numerous studies have examined the costs of macho displays in contexts ranging from aeronautics to manufacturing to high tech to the law. They show that men’s attempts to prove their masculinity interfere with the training of recruits, compromise decision quality, marginalize women workers, lead to civil- and human-rights violations, and alienate men from their health, feelings, and relationships with others. The price of men’s striving to demonstrate their masculinity is high, and both individuals and organizations pay it.”

Things are changing and there is less of this macho image,

but we still have some work to do. Ask any woman about her experiences on projects and get the real story. We did an anonymous poll a few years back. Here is just a portion of the unedited responses:

WHAT IS YOUR BIGGEST ISSUE AS A WOMAN IN THE AEC INDUSTRY?

- » Career Advancement
- » Being treated as less than average
- » Garnering (equal) respect for our contributions to the work
- » Not being taken seriously as a viable candidate for promotion when comparable to male candidate
- » Lack of flexibility in my workday to do things with my children
- » Trying to encourage other women (especially millennials) to enter the construction industry
- » Lack of respect and unacknowledged value that I bring to my position
- » Parity in salary. Respect. I hate being called “gal”
- » Having a voice and a place to the table
- » The amount of energy it takes to be heard and respected
- » Men’s prejudice against women’s ability.
- » Lacking parity (a voice, money, influence) with men doing the same job
- » Respect as an insightful value added teammate
- » Proving myself every time I meet a new person
- » Getting the same respect as men
- » Sex discrimination
- » The mass assumption that I am in a junior position to all males at the table
- » Pay equity
- » Being seen as a decision-maker - men tend to assume that they need to speak with another male
- » There are no issues, once you prove yourself and your worth to the company
- » High level/principal level role
- » Not being taken seriously
- » Networking in a male-centric industry
- » Work-life balance and meeting work demands while raising a family
- » I am not taken seriously

- » Lack of female leadership/role models
- » Respect
- » Lack of “C” level positions
- » I am constantly being talked over
- » Inappropriate jokes and limited opportunities
- » Lack of assumed credibility from coworkers

AN EXERCISE

Ask everyone at your company what they think the biggest issues for women in the industry are and have them respond. Capture these responses on Post-It notes or on a whiteboard, then go through this list and see where the matches and disconnects are. Have a discussion around it. Do you see patterns in their responses? Did your responses match their responses?

WOMEN HAVE TO DO THEIR PART AS WELL

Let’s talk about bias toward our own groups. As a woman, ask yourself, do you have an implicit bias against other women? You can take the [implicit bias test](#) if you want to explore those potential biases in depth.

If you are a woman who has bias against other women, how do you manage this? How do you deal with it? It is vital that women support each other in this endeavor to increase diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, and this is a big piece of the puzzle. Recognizing the bias and taking steps to overcome the bias is the key for change.


CANCEL CULTURE

The current cancel culture creates a dilemma for white males. We are so afraid of making mistakes, we tend to hang back and do nothing. Although I am sure that there are some men out there who deliberately treat women poorly, most of the men I know in the industry do this out of ignorance, not intention. And in some cases, intention becomes irrelevant.

Here is an example: I was at a fundraiser recently for a local college and the emcee gave an award to a young person in attendance. He called her a “lady engineer” and said that we needed more “young lady engineers” in the industry. He was trying to be respectful. When I asked the “young lady engineers” in attendance, they told me they preferred that no gender reference be made and if it is made, that “woman engineer” is the preferred term or maybe even “engineer”.

This is a lesson learned for all the white guys out there. Ask how folks would like to be addressed and do your best to comply. This goes for pronouns as well. Think about how your words will affect others, especially women, people of color, and protected groups. And if you make a mistake, sincerely apologize. Don’t say, “You took it wrong” or “You’re being too sensitive.” Or “I didn’t mean it that way.” Apologize, vow to improve, and move on. Make a mental note to do something different next time. And women, although we probably don’t deserve it, we need your help. Let us know when we make mistakes and tell us how we can be better. For most of the men I know out there, I can tell you that we are sincerely trying to be better.

IN CONCLUSION

To sum up, we have an issue with the lack of women in engineering and construction and we have created this issue over many years. Although our relationship with women in the industry is certainly getting better, we still have a lot of work to do. There are no easy fixes or overnight solutions. The first step is to acknowledge this issue and vow to take steps to make this industry more inclusive to women. The next step is to act. Start now. Make the mistakes and keep going until we have an industry that is diverse and inclusive where everyone feels a sense of belonging. Hopefully, this article has given you some good ideas to start this journey. 



About the Author

Brent Darnell is the owner and president of [Brent Darnell International](#) and a mechanical engineer and a graduate of Georgia Tech. He is a leading authority on emotional intelligence and a pioneer in its use in the construction industry to improve social competence and leadership skill among managers and executives. He is an adjunct professor at Auburn and Penn State universities and author of the well-received book, *The People-Profit Connection* and the Tough Guy series. His programs, books, and online courses, including [CMAA's Leadership Library](#), are helping to transform the industry.

Specific to the topic of this article, Brent invites you to check out the [Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging \(DEIB\) in the AEC Industry: Beyond Compliance](#) course that is part of the CMAA Leadership Library.

Email Brent at brent@brentdarnell.com for a DEIB exercise call Reincarnation (from Thiago at thiagi.com).

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