

## A Different Voice: How Women Are Driving the Future Of Construction

Written by: InEight Blog Editors

With widespread labor shortages facing our industry, engagement within the female population is essential to achieving any hope of expanding and delivering successful construction projects in 2023 and beyond. It is also a very smart business move. Why? Because the numbers don't lie.

The latest data from McKinsey & Company again reports that the most gender diverse companies are at least 25% more likely to achieve above average profitability than their less diverse competitors.[1] And that diversity includes gender.

Yet in Australia, women still make up only 12% of the construction workforce.[2] In the U.S., female representation in construction is even lower, hovering at around the 10% mark, and out on the actual job sites, that number plummets to barely 1%.[3] What can be done to bolster these numbers and help boost the success of our industry in the process?

During events held on two continents, InEight sat down with some of the industry's best and brightest to uncover insights concerning today's women in construction. Our North America participants included Catie Williams, InEight; Karla Firth, Graham; Pamela MaGee, Ledcor; and Brittany Dodson, Orion Marine Group. Our Australia panel included Sarah Roach, Abergeldie Complex Infrastructure, and Brendan Morton, Laing O'Rourke, for the male point of view.

What follows are highlights from these important discussions on the collective journey, lessons learned and ultimately, how best to narrow the gender gap in construction and why it matters more now than ever before.



### ALL ROADS CAN LEAD TO CONSTRUCTION

Contrary to what might seem a logical path for women and even men as they choose construction careers, having some sort of childhood "aha" moment is not necessary or even typical. Meaningful roles, onsite and off, tend to feed in, instead, from a wide variety of backgrounds and natural talents.

For Williams, who is currently serving as Vice President of Product Development for InEight, it's more about connecting the dots first rather than the rebar. "I think there is a misconception out there that you must have a strong passion really young for Legos," she jokes.

"In my case, I worked for Kiewit right out of college, and all I knew then was that I wanted to work for them because they were so impactful in the community. But I didn't even know

what was possible at that point. So, I just applied for the first job that seemed to be aligned with my skills. Sometimes, you simply have to start, and go from there.”

As a Project Controls Manager at Orion, Dodson has been in the construction industry for almost a full decade. “I fell into it by chance,” she explains. “I was actually looking to change industries. I was in retail and that had its challenges. Then we had a family friend who was in construction and had a large project coming up in our area. So, I just reached out to her on my own and asked what kind of opportunities that they were going to have, and the rest is history.”

Working out of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada as a Virtual Construction Specialist for Graham, Firth came to the industry through a passion for numbers. “I loved math, so I knew I wanted to get into something related. I went into civil engineering and right out of school, started to survey, and it all fell into place,” she says. “I really just fell in love with the art of survey. I’ve been in the industry 15 years now, so I’m proof that you don’t have to have boots on the ground to be counted in construction.”

For MaGee, a Project Applications Manager at Ledcor also in Edmonton, it was her fascination with the power of spreadsheets that led her to construction. “I started working for The Brick, which is a furniture retailer, where I did demand forecasting and tweaking algorithms. You could say that I really got hired because I’m a big Excel dork,” she says, laughing. “That’s how I ended up in construction. It wasn’t on the playground, playing with diggers or anything like that.”

Now General Manager Commercial at Abergeldie, Roach’s early inclinations toward construction were not directly encouraged. In year 12 of her education, she went to her father and informed him that she’d like to preference engineering for university. His response at the time? Women were simply not engineers, and that she ought to stick with law and commerce instead.

So, she pursued law and commerce, majoring in accounting, but very quickly moved herself back into construction and started a construction law firm. She soon moved onto more commercial roles as chief operating officer for a property development and scaffolding company, and then started as a commercial manager in civil construction.

For Morton, Project Technical Leader for Laing, it all started more traditionally in engineering, being a career choice never questioned as a male, yet has taken him to various sides of the industry. “I’ve been pretty blinkered, so to speak, toward the engineering space but have also worked across government, private consulting and contracting for the last six years or so,” he says. “For myself, I think it’s really telling that when you move from consulting across to contracting that the throwaway line in the discussion is always ‘oh, you’re going to the dark side.’ That’s something I feel needs to be discussed, and how we can get away from that mentality.”

### THE POWER OF “THINKING DIFFERENTLY”

So, once there, how does the female perspective change the working dynamic of construction teams, and what unique things does a woman bring to the table that are different from a man? What can be gained from working with women and what are the advantages of having them around?

For one thing, conversations and outcomes seem to shift with females in the room. “Women bring a sort of curiosity, as in ‘why are you doing that?’” says Morton. “As a man, I can say that when you’ve got a very non-diverse group in a room, you just don’t have those sorts of conversations because you’re all thinking the same way more or less. So just that little switch, just one female comes in, changes the dynamic, and brings a diversity of thought. Those ‘breath of fresh air’ moments lead into a different outcome that makes everything so much better.”

It’s also about reflecting local communities more fully. To bring that representation into the industry and into what is being delivered, there needs to be a truer mirror for the diversity around us. Female input can help create that by varying the way we think things out as a group.

“Women are wired a bit differently. We have heart. We’re compassionate,” Firth points out. “We’re also really good at multi-tasking, so having an employee that has multiple tasks on the go but considers emotions during problem solving is exactly what the construction industry needs. It’s like a fresh way to step back and say, ‘Okay, hang on, what can we do that’s a different option?’ It’s also having that caring voice and yet having the courage to say, ‘Hey, you know what, guys? I have an idea.’ In my mind, that is where it’s really going to be impactful.”

“In my experience, I’ve actually had a former boss say that he was always eager to get more women on his team because we bring a special level of passion,” Dodson adds. “I think that, along with the different perspectives, helps a lot. It also brings a fun mix to the table. Women are always having to think out of the box or go to plan B if plan A doesn’t work.”

MaGee agrees. “Women are naturally good at multitasking, so it’s great to be able to have multiple things on our plates and quite a bit of stuff in the air and yet still be able to manage it all,” she says. “Women also tend to be very good at mentoring and training new employees. I find that there’s just a little bit more sharing and less of a sort of ‘sink or swim’ approach. That mindset seems to yield more positive outcomes as well for employees who have been overseen by female leaders.”

### **THE RIGHT MENTOR: IT’S NOT ALWAYS WHO YOU THINK**

When it comes to finding a mentor, the tendency for most women might be to automatically look to another woman. But is this the only way, or going even further, is this the best way? All our panelists had different opinions and experiences on mentors, but one thing they all agreed on was that having one – or more than one – is essential.

“I think it would be ideal to find both men and women as mentors to provide you that support and sponsorship throughout your career,” Morton says. “It gives both mentor and mentee that opportunity to look for those differences. Ultimately, it feeds the diversity conversation and opens our minds. You’ve heard the saying ‘great minds think alike,’ but perhaps we should be saying ‘great minds think differently’ because if we want to change things for the better, we’ve got to think differently.”

How can a male mentor help? “Though there are phenomenal female leaders at Graham that I look up to, there was also one particular male manager that really made a difference for me,” explains Firth. “Because what I took from him was that he just didn’t care, meaning he didn’t hesitate to ask questions if he didn’t understand something. Witnessing his behavior and confidence in meetings even when he didn’t understand the topic demonstrated that it’s ok to ask the question. Some girls in a workplace may feel intimidated, sitting at a table with a group of men, to ask a question when something doesn’t make sense. For myself, if he could ask questions, why couldn’t I just

simply say ‘You know what? I have a question?’ I feel like he gave me that.”

Besides the formal mentor-mentee relationship, there is also an informal sort of mentoring building in the background within the industry. These informal mentorships across disciplines can be key because they fill the need for individuals who may feel that, for them, formal mentoring is centered too heavily around people who have a traditional construction background.

Roach also sees the value of sponsorship. Beyond even informal mentorship programs, this sponsorship of people, meaning a mentor-mentee relationship that is more an informal check-in with touchpoints, can lend support and guidance along the way. By developing these sponsorship-type relationships, new opportunities can arise.

MaGee points out that sometimes, however, a female mentee must make the first move. “I see some of the younger women coming up and asking a lot of questions of me,” MaGee says. “Then I notice the men in the office. They’re playing hockey together, they’re friendly, they’re going out and doing stuff with each other. It’s just sort of natural and organic for them. So, I think sometimes the men in leadership may fear doing the wrong thing when it comes to mentoring women, therefore women need to be unafraid to reach out to men first.”

Dodson notes another perhaps overlooked benefit of mentors. “I’ve had both female and male mentors in my career,” she says. “But no matter who you choose, I do think that having a mentor is very beneficial in another way. It can be comforting, even if it’s simply asking them, ‘Hey, what do you think about this?’ or ‘Do you think that I’m a good fit for this new role?’ I do appreciate all the mentors that I’ve had, and I hope everyone gets to experience at least one great one in their career.”

### **BEST COMPANY PRACTICES FOR ATTRACTING (AND KEEPING) FEMALE CONSTRUCTION TALENT**

So how do we, besides mentorships and sponsorships, make sure that the construction industry is seen as something more women want to be in, and something that evolves along with their careers over their own unique journey?

One way is by intentionally committing to a different outcome and having actual metric targets around gender participation to motivate change. “Our company has programs to attract

and retain gender diverse talent into the business,” Morton explains. “We also have programs inspiring S.T.E.M. school programs targeting the next generation. So, it’s an investment in a lot of areas to try and proactively turn the dial with what’s happening today, and what’s going to happen tomorrow and further into the future.” And the plan seems to be working.

“We have 45% of the positions in our Australian executive committee filled by women and our managing director is female. With our Melbourne-based project teams, we’re sitting at 37% female senior leadership, which then leads to about 53% overall female position participation in that team,” reports Morton.

Roach feels that it also comes down to the adage you can’t be what you can’t see.

At Abergeldie, for instance, she points out that there are several amazing women within the senior leadership team. The more women like this who are seen in leadership roles and even more so in executive roles in businesses, the more it becomes attractive to other women. Therefore, demonstrating a culture that shows women in those roles in business and in industry can be a real driving force to inspire other women to put their hands up. Bonus? It might also encourage hiring managers to look at more diverse skillsets and experience when filling those roles.

For Dodson, it’s also about stronger messaging on various platforms, physical and virtual, to help normalize the conversation. “More people need to start actively communicating and getting the word out. Whether it’s in your own community or via social media, meaning TikTok or whatever, because though things are improving, there’s still a lot to do to keep gaining ground.”

“In the end, it comes back to leadership and recognizing that there’s an under-represented contingent of their own community in the room,” Morton says. “So, making sure everyone’s got a voice and an opportunity is critical. Because if we’re doing that, we’re encouraging diversity, and we’ll hopefully see, over time, two, three, four or more females in the room. Then there will be less of a feeling for women of ‘I’m outnumbered. I’m not sure what I’m offering here because no one’s listening to me.’”

## ADVICE FOR WOMEN LOOKING TO GET INTO CONSTRUCTION

With all the things our panelists have learned at this point in their careers, what’s their advice for women or even young girls who are interested in construction, and for parents who are trying to guide their daughters?

In terms of practical advice around development, Roach’s key suggestion is to build a network internally within the university you are attending, and then to build a network externally. Why? Because at a certain point, many of the opportunities often found will be made available based on networks. Further, if there are additional opportunities to be involved in a different project or a different part of a project, those kinds of things can often be identified and provided based on knowing someone within the business.

“You also need to start saying yes to opportunities. Just take the chance,” advises MaGee. “I think women doubt themselves more, thinking they don’t have what it takes. Failing is okay, but you’re never going to get anywhere just hoping it’s going to happen to you. You need to take the chance yourself. Go across the country and do what you need to do so that you’re a team player and that people see you have a passion for this. That’s going to come across and be the biggest propellant in your career and give you the most exposure to the things that are out there.”

Dodson believes in simply being your own best representative. “Just speak up! You have at least a 50/50 shot, right? So, if it’s something you want to go for, then say it. If the person that you’re saying it to isn’t listening, then go find someone else. Take the time to travel, too. Go to those different sites. I think that helped me a lot in the beginning, to be able to go to the different projects and different locations.”

Her final piece of advice? Echoing back to what Williams said, “Sometimes, all you have to do is press the ‘start’ button and everything else will fall into place. But you have to start.”

## INTENTIONAL INVESTMENT IN THE FUTURE

Everyone can agree that though the industry has improved in the representation of women in key roles, there’s still a long way to go. Much more work needs to be done, and that means an investment in shifting the perception of – and for – women in construction.

That shift can happen in giant steps, but also in brief, relatable moments that echo over generations and even beverages.

“When I’ve been in meetings and it’s ‘Karla, can you take the minutes?’ Now, it’s ‘No, you take the minutes. We have a whole group of people who can take minutes,’” Firth explains. “Just because I’m the female, I don’t need to make the coffee, you know? So, while we still have those stereotypes to deal with, it’s definitely getting better.”

Like all meaningful change, however, it comes back to a deliberate effort to alter perceptions, not just for women but for everyone, men included. This new future will therefore rely on the power of intentional investment over time. Case in point? Women’s sport.

“If you look at the Australian women’s cricket team, for example, it’s an amazing team, right? And it’s dominating the field. But that didn’t happen overnight,” Morton explains. “There’s been a deliberate intent and investment to get that team to where they are now. A few years back, women’s cricket might have looked a bit clunky, but that’s only because they were still transferring skills from other sports.


“You watch that team today, and you’ve got young girls who have come up playing cricket representing their country. When I stand back from the TV now, I have to look twice and say, ‘Am I looking at the women’s or the men’s cricket?’ So, I think that’s where we’ve got to get to with construction; an investment for what’s coming.”

Roach, though she sees and celebrates the wins, also knows it’s not time for the industry to sit back on its laurels.

At the recent Australian Water Association Awards in Sydney, for example, she noticed that overwhelmingly, females dominated both the student and the young professional award categories. But still, the category of Water Professional of the Year saw many more men nominated. So, while there is much progress happening in the early recruitment space, there is still much more to be done in terms of retention and development.

In the end, no one is saying that all women should choose construction. What they are saying, however, is that the traditional mental, social, and gender barriers to what is being chosen must be removed, making all career choices for women – and by extension, everyone – free and well-informed.

Morton looks forward to when a woman’s self-talk around construction changes for good.

“The day is coming when it will no longer be ‘I’d love to do it, but it’s not for me because I’m female,’ but instead simply ‘I’d love to do it. And I might decide between that and law or commerce.” 



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## About the Article

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[1] Diversity Wins, McKinsey & Company, May, 2020.

[2] Time to Attract Women to Construct, Australian Constructors Association, September, 2022.

[3] Statistics on Women in Construction, National Assoc. of Women in Construction, 2022.

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