

Addressing the barriers to recruitment and progression in Australia's Transport Industry

Australia's transport industry employs more than 530,000 Australians across its major subsectors of rail, road, sea, and air. Demands on freight are increasing and the industry confronts a rising skills shortage, driven by the prevailing social trends of the COVID-19 pandemic, shifting geopolitical tensions, the rise in enabling technologies and increased demands for corporate social responsibility. The skills shortage has been aggravated by the industry's long-standing struggle to project its image and to attract women and younger workers.

In a collaboration with partners the Federal Government's Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications and iMOVE Australia, Deakin University's Wayfinder: *Supply Chain Careers for Women*, undertook a stocktake of the current initiatives in place to support women across all sectors of the transport industry. The report considers barriers to recruitment, retention, and promotion across all dimensions of the career lifecycle: societal (attitudes about gender roles), organisational practices and policies, behavioural (discriminatory attitudes in the workplace) and individual characteristics (including education and experience). It acknowledges that women are not a homogenous group, and that they face different challenges at different stages of their careers. It also acknowledges the business imperatives which can impose particular challenges in terms of workplace amenity in some sectors of the industry.

The report describes long-standing and interconnected structural barriers in relation to workplace conditions and culture, discrimination, and gender stereotyping. Poor industry image is one of the key barriers to recruitment, with the transport industry perceived as male-dominated and 'blokey', with unattractive and sometimes unsafe conditions. It is a 'Cinderella' industry, seen by many as a second-tier career option if it is considered at all.

Many parts of the transport industry require long hours and, in some cases, extended periods away from home, which can make it unattractive to women who continue to have primary responsibility for children and elderly parents and indeed for millennials, who have very different expectations around work-life balance than their baby boomer predecessors. There are also health and safety concerns around isolation and the availability of suitable facilities as well as concerns about sexual harassment and bullying. And there are structural barriers within organisations, with hiring practices and promotional policies following the way 'things have always been done here'. Position descriptions often insist on prior operational experience, disadvantaging women who do not have the same opportunities to acquire operational experience either prior to recruitment or on the job.

People bring their beliefs about gender unthinkingly into the workplace, disadvantaging women both at recruitment and career progression. Gender stereotypes subtly influence which candidates are recruited for certain roles, how salaries are negotiated, and which employees receive career development opportunities and encouragement. Unconscious bias can affect the sort of questions raised at interview and assumptions are often made about capacity based on outdated views. Technological change has reduced the need for physical strength in many parts of the sector.

There have been many government and industry initiatives introduced with the aim of addressing the gender gap in the transport industry, and Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) data suggests there has been some (if limited) progress. The report undertook a desk top review, identifying 74 programs and analysing 53 initiatives in detail (29 government and 24 industry).

Based on an extensive review of the literature, the researchers developed a list of actions found to be successful in supporting women at each stage of their transport career. They adapted the 'attraction-selection-attrition' (ASA) methodology to undertake a gap analysis of the programs reviewed.

While there are limitations to any desktop analysis, the report identified three areas that appear to be well supported by existing programs: raising awareness of the industry and its opportunities; mentoring women at all stages of their career; and providing networking opportunities.

Program areas that the research suggests are successful in addressing barriers to recruitment and success but that were not well as well supported by current government and industry programs were:

- diversity training around recruitment and ongoing diversity training for managers
- opportunities to optimise recruitment through increased awareness of the value of transferable skills
- the need to ensure job positions and advertisements use gender neutral language.
- internships, skill development and work placement opportunities
- initiatives to increase work life balance such as parent friendly rosters
- inclusive professional development opportunities
- workplace safety and amenity (including ensuring there are appropriate facilities for women).

Importantly, the success of all initiatives will depend on improving workplace culture, with a role for both public policy and workplace policies and practices. There is also a growing recognition of the role of men in ensuring an inclusive workplace, and few of the programs actively involved men as allies for gender equity. The literature review noted that many of the issues identified as barriers for women were also relevant for millennial males.

The report suggests that to address the gender barriers to recruitment and progression in Australia's transport industry it is important to acknowledge the following issues.

- The need for program development to have an evidence base – listening both to industry and government not only in program development but in ongoing monitoring.
- The importance of addressing systemic structural change around workplace safety and amenity, workplace culture and work life balance.
- The value of workplace training and skill development initiatives.
- The value of building on the successes of existing programs – there are programs with significant successes in both government and industry initiatives.
- While it is important to seed fund pilot programs, once an initiative is found to be successful, any advantage will be lost without ongoing funding.
- The importance of clear and transparent program governance.
- The value of building strong cross-sectoral links, learning from the experience of other male- dominated industries.
- The need for a strong commitment to diversity from an organisation's leadership.