Women in non-traditional roles — A case study of one organisation achieving results, 03 August 2011

A company that provides staffing, maintenance and project services across Australia and New Zealand is not the sort of organisation that would necessarily be expected to have had much success in the employment and development of women in non-traditional roles. However, in 2011, one of this company’s female apprentices won the Victorian Master Builders Association, Apprentice of the Year Award in the Painting and Decorating Category. Barbara Holmes, Director of Managing Work|Life Balance International reports on what this organisation has been doing, as well as its accomplishments.

The company — Programmed Group — provides staffing, maintenance and project services to over 7,000 customers across a broad range of industries and markets, such as resources, infrastructure, education, health, manufacturing and logistics. Programmed Group directly employs more than 10,000 skilled and semi-skilled people (many in trade roles) across a range of business capabilities to support three major business segments:

1. Property and Infrastructure — providing building, maintenance and operation services to property and infrastructure sectors
2. Resources and Industrial — providing construction, maintenance and operation services to the resources and industrial sectors, and
3. Workforce — providing temporary and permanent staffing services.

Programmed Group’s Diversity Strategy encompasses the need to increase the number of women within the workforce, particularly in management and trades. This strategy has senior management buy-in, is sponsored by the Group General Manager for Human Resources and is overseen by the recently appointed Group Manager of Talent, Engagement and Diversity.

While Programmed Group is proud of their significant successes to date, the company recognises that there are still more things that need to be done. The primary focus now is to continue Programmed Group’s journey towards a supportive culture, which encourages flexible work practices, accepts difference in a predominantly blue-collar trades-based organisation, and also delivers on the company’s diversity targets.

Programmed Group has set targets to increase the number of women in management roles to 40% and women in trades to 5% by 2014. The latter goal has already been achieved, with 5.5% of women in trades positions (this is above the national average of 3.1%).

The company is progressing well with regards to moving women into senior roles. In recent months, the company has employed the first woman to sit on the company’s executive team, and a number of women currently work in Key Facility Management and Painting Manager roles. A number of talented female apprentices have also been identified for development. In addition, the number of female non-executive directors on the Board has doubled.

To set the foundation for the attraction and retention of women, Programmed Group has upgraded their Paid Parental Leave policies, which now includes Paid Partners Leave and additional superannuation benefits. The company has also relaunched a number of guides and handbooks on parenting and parental leave.

Another initiative designed to assist women to manage their career progression has been the Mentoring Pilot Program. This was trialled in one part of the business. Twenty-five per cent of the mentorees were women and eight per cent of the mentors were women.

The company has an additional strategy called “Insight”. This is an online talent and career development tool which enables all employees to see the diverse career pathways available at Programmed Group. All employees are encouraged to consider opportunities available to them, with many men and women
remaining with the company for a significant proportion of their careers, progressing from apprenticeships through to supervisory and management roles.

One of the real challenges in any organisation is encouraging women to consider non-traditional roles as one of the many possibilities within their chosen trade or profession, and to manage the perceptions that others may have about the contribution of women in the workforce. One of the tools Programmed Group uses to raise awareness is the company’s internal newsletter. Over the last financial year, the company has run a number of feature articles on women in the workplace. The articles have to date focused on women working in different roles across the business. Sue Pridmore and Jessie McKibbon are two such women who have featured in the newsletter.

Ms Pridmore is a State Manager in Facilities Management. She has forged a successful career in the largely male-dominated property sector. Ms Pridmore views Programmed Group’s support of flexible working arrangements as a point of difference that makes the company an attractive employer for women. She says “I have been able to enter into an arrangement which ensures the responsibilities of my role are met, but allows me the flexibility to care for my daughter”.

In 2011, Jessie McKibbon won the Master Builders Association of Victoria Apprentice of the Year Award in the Painting and Decorating category. She has continued on to be runner-up for Programmed Group’s internal Australian Painting Services National Apprentice of the Year.

Melissa Donald, Group Manager — Talent and Diversity, says that “one of the keys to their success is providing accessible and transparent information about the range of career opportunities available and empowering women to achieve their full potential”.

“Programmed Group believes that the diversity of their people is one of their great strengths. They are better able to meet the diverse needs of their clients by deploying people with different backgrounds, experiences and perspectives”, she said.

Unfortunately, this view has not as yet been accepted as the norm by many employers.

ACTU Conference highlights goals of women unionists

At the Women in Male Dominated Industries and Occupations Conference in late 2010, which was organised by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), delegates discussed the challenges that many women face in non-traditional roles and the ways in which more women can be encouraged to move into these jobs and professions. At the beginning of the conference, ACTU President, Ged Kearney, set out the key industrial and campaign goals for women unionists, which included:

- helping women balance work and family by improving the right to request flexible work arrangements, extending carer’s leave and bargaining to top up the paid parental leave scheme
- improving women’s access to child care, out-of-school hours care and respite care
- striving for pay equity for women, through the Australian Services Union (ASU) equal pay case for social and community sector workers
- improving equal opportunity for women by lobbying for changes to anti-discrimination laws and requiring employers to provide equal opportunities for men and women in their workplaces, and
- improving women’s access to vocational education and training, skills development and trade apprenticeships.

In later workshop sessions, delegates highlighted the need for better working conditions, increased access to equal employment and career development opportunities, such as apprenticeships, higher duties and on-the-job training, as well as the elimination of discrimination and prejudice in the workplace.

It is clear that employers and unions recognise the importance of addressing these issues if they are to attract and retain women in traditionally male-dominated workplaces. Employers need to address the many barriers that women face “on the ground”. This means that not only do they need to provide basic facilities for women, they also need to address the workplace culture and the behaviour of others who have the potential
to undermine a woman’s ability to gain the credibility and trust that she needs to survive and thrive in often challenging circumstances. In addition, options such as flexible working arrangements, paid parental leave, career guidance and coaching help women (whether in traditional or non-traditional roles) to achieve their career potential. The return on investment for employers is a more committed and engaged employee who is more likely to stay with the organisation.

**About the author**

Barbara Holmes is the Director of Managing Work|Life Balance International — one of Australia’s leading consultancies in the area of work–life balance and flexible work arrangements. Much of Barbara’s work involves working with managers and employees in client organisations to create change in the workplace, enabling businesses to thrive and employees to achieve the balance and career goals to which they aspire. Barbara has worked extensively in Australia and around the Asia Pacific region, providing advice, consulting support and a range of practical tool kits and resources to government and private sector organisations. Barbara can be contacted on telephone number at 1300 131 126. For more information on Managing Work|Life Balance International, please go to www.worklifebalance.com.au.