

The Daily Telegraph

Engineering faces talent 'time bomb'

New drive to recruit women and change image of male-dominated profession

By Roland Gribben

A DRIVE to encourage women to take up engineering careers to help ease shortages and head off a "demographic time bomb" will be launched next week.

The initiative comes in the wake of a report by the Women in Work Commission, backed by the Prime Minister, which called for girls to receive career advice on "non-traditional" jobs in an attempt to reduce the 13pc gender wage gap.

Provisional industry research, to be presented at the government-funded UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology in London on Wednesday, points to the "male-dominated environment" and "workplace culture and practices" as the main obstacles preventing women becoming engineers.

Most engineers agree that women are just as competent as men when they are working alongside each other, although 30pc of the sample doubt whether they are as talented and capable.

Many of the respondents also blame shortcomings in the

education system for the failure to produce enough engineers. They cite a lack of understanding among teachers and career advisers about opportunities for women.

The organisers feel there is a degree of "profession-wide inertia" on the issue and believe the absence of "female role models" at the frontiers of engineering and technology is a deterrent.

Women account for around 8pc of engineers but the UK Resource Centre and survey team believe the proportion could be well into double figures with the help of government and company initiatives along with school and parental encouragement.

Former Nasa engineer Mary Inman, second in command at EPCglobal, the engineering staffing company carrying out the survey, fears the profession could soon face a crisis without an influx of women.

She said: "The shortage of qualified engineers is a serious problem and it's set to get worse. A demographic time bomb is ticking because anyone with a technical mind went into IT in the 1990s and senior engineers are now retiring.



Bright spark: Sara Pullen of BAE Systems went against the grain of her classmates, winning her acclaim (right)

We know as a staffing provider that there's a real risk demand created by several huge projects that are getting under way in the next 15 years won't be met. Attracting more women into the profession is part of the answer. We're only fishing from half the pool."

Rolls-Royce and BAE Systems are attempting to attract more women through improved ties with schools and universities. British

Gas, with just over 100 women engineers out of a total of 9,000 service engineers, aims to double the number of women this year.

Academics point to gender stereotypes and negative perceptions of engineers as deterrents to persuading women that the profession is worthwhile.

But some other countries appear to be successfully tackling the problem. In the Indian state of

Kerala, for instance, women account for 60pc to 75pc of the engineering student body.

Sara Pullen, a BAE Systems engineer, has not been deterred. She is the latest winner of The Young Woman Engineer of the Year award, organised by Women into Science, Engineering and Construction. She says: "My classmates at school all wanted to be pop stars, astronauts or fighter

pilots, all exciting jobs but the one thing I wanted to do was to dismantle things and see how they worked, which is where I got the idea to become an engineer."

She may also have been inspired by her grandfather, who worked for Boeing building helicopters, and her great aunt, who was an engineer working on Concorde.

Engineering focus: A10-11

Publication:
Subject:
Circulation:
Date:
Source:

The Daily Telegraph
EPCglobal / UKRC research
897,385
March 2, 2006
Coverage arranged by Wide PR