

Joining the real world

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This is a personal account of my experiences in moving from university into the workforce. It will explain how attitudes towards women played an important part in my decision not to pursue a career in engineering; my experience of working as a consultant so far; and my thoughts on my future in consulting.

At the end of 1999, I completed a Bachelor of Engineering (Telecommunications Engineering) and a Bachelor of Science (majoring in Computer Science). During my course, I had every intention of pursuing a career in engineering and undertook four summers of industry work experience, all in the field of engineering. In the end, however, I decided to pursue a career in the IT industry, and I am now working as an IT consultant for PricewaterhouseCoopers. Until I began to reflect on my first year out of university, it hadn't occurred to me that my university work experiences had much influence in my choice of career. However, these experiences revealed the persistence of old-fashioned attitudes towards women in engineering, and this contributed to me turning away from engineering as a career.

My first summer work experience was initially quite fun. I was working for an electricity distribution company, and for the first six weeks I worked on a construction site where a large substation was being built, doing jobs with the cable jointers and assisting the road gang in digging holes for pipes and cabling. I was the only woman in these teams, and so was a bit of a novelty. In spite of this, I was treated in much the same manner as any newcomer would be.

For the final six weeks I worked in the office with the engineers. For the most part this was not too bad, if a little dull on occasion. I was, however, put off by the attitude of some of the managers towards the technicians. At the time I was working for the company, a major corporate restructure was being planned, and the senior manager of the division had called a meeting of all the technicians to explain the implications of this restructure. During this meeting the manager talked down to the technicians, apparently attempting to "talk their language" (an attempt which included rather a lot of swearing). The next morning he called me into his office and apologised for having to use such language in front of me. As he hadn't offered the same apologies to anyone else in the office, I can only assume he thought that, as a female, I would be offended by bad language. In fact, I was more offended that he felt I needed an apology. He then proceeded to tell me that the only way to talk to "these people" was to use that sort of

language and that it was all they understood. I was appalled that a manager could be so out of touch with the people under his leadership, and acquired a first-hand experience of why this man was so disliked by the technicians.

My second summer was spent in Perth working for the engineering arm of a mining and resources company. Again, I was the only woman in the office in a non-administrative role. I had relocated from Sydney for the summer, and knew only a few people in Perth. I was therefore amazed to discover that my manager had instructed the team not to speak to me, lest I distract them in any way. I am mystified as to why he did this, but as it happened, I ended up making friends with everyone in the team anyway. The tasks I had been given were boring in the extreme, and looked suspiciously like work that had been created purely to keep me busy.

I experienced a similar sense of exclusion during my third work experience, with a medium-sized electronics company in Sydney, although I was, on that occasion, given a real opportunity to put my combined knowledge of programming and hardware to good use.

My final work experience was with a Sydney-based electricity generation company. The people in my team were friendly and keen to have me working with them. Another female engineer worked on the team and I had been deliberately placed under her supervision because of her gender, the assumption being that I would feel more comfortable working with another woman. The work was not all that exciting, but due to the friendliness of my colleagues, my time with the company was not too unpleasant.

So how did these experiences affect my choice of career? When the recruitment process for students in my year began in early 1999, I had only a few requirements for my first graduate job. I wanted a job that would constantly challenge me and provide an interesting range of work. I had learnt from work experience that boredom can be one of the worst things about a job, and I am aware that many of my friends who took jobs with engineering firms are finding that they are not intellectually satisfied by the work they are doing. As I was not sure of where I wanted to be in five years' time, my second requirement was that my first graduate job should place me in a good position to follow a broad range of possible career paths. My third requirement was for a work environment that would give me the opportunity to work with interesting people from a range of different backgrounds and with a variety of interests.

I knew that I did not wish to work in industries like those of the companies I had already worked for, and I didn't apply to any of those companies for a graduate placement. At that stage I still intended to pursue a career as an engineer, and had not really considered the area of consulting. I happened to come across the PricewaterhouseCoopers stand at a careers fair, and ended up chatting to a recruitment manager and decided to apply for a consulting position. I ended up applying for two IT consulting positions as well as several engineering positions. I didn't have the highest opinion of management consulting at the time - the common perception of the industry as requiring consultants to work ridiculous hours, to the point of graduates being "burnt out" within two years, would make anyone wary, and I was no exception.

At PricewaterhouseCoopers, no one hides the fact that if a job needs to be done, the consultants must do whatever is required to get it done on time and to a high standard. What made PricewaterhouseCoopers stand out for me was that it offered to meet each of my three requirements for a graduate position. Projects generally run for short periods and offer a varying range of role. The work can be quite challenging, requiring mastery of new technologies and delivery of work within tight deadlines. Opportunities exist to work in different industries, and the firm has a clear set of guidelines for career progression. Finally, the firm has a youthful, dynamic and sociable work environment.

The move from university into the workforce has been interesting. I did not expect adjusting to full-time work to necessarily be easy, but in addition to the challenges set before me, I discovered two things about myself which took me by surprise. At university, I was one of very few women in my course, and so I found that I actually had to get used to interacting with women again. The other surprise was that staying at work well into the night didn't end up being as bad as I imagined – I discovered that I'm far more driven by a sense of team membership than I was aware.

In my experience of consulting, there is a very strong sense of equality amongst the teams, even across different levels of experience and expertise. I believe a number of factors contribute towards this. Firstly, women make up a large proportion of the consultants – nearly 50% of recent graduates have been female. Secondly, the consulting industry is relatively young, as are a large proportion of the consultants. Consequently, consulting seems to have picked up more contemporary attitudes to women than engineering, an older industry that still retains a more conservative outlook.

What I've found consulting lacks is women in higher levels of management. Although the national leader of the Strategic Change practice is a woman, I'm aware of only a few

female project managers and partners, and the proportion of women employed declines sharply the further up the levels of management one looks. It bothers me that I haven't seen many women having children and still enjoying the career prospects available to their male colleagues. Although I'm happy with my current situation, and believe that the next five years or so hold much promise for me, I am concerned by the apparent difficulties of starting a family while not diminishing one's career prospects.

There seem to be several barriers to successfully balancing career and family in consulting. In other industries, women can employ various methods to achieve this balance, such as taking maternity leave or temporarily leaving the workforce, working part time, working from home, or taking their children to work with them if necessary. However, I don't believe these methods are easy to implement in consulting as it is now. An absence of more than twelve months can put you out of touch with current technology and business practices, and this can be a disincentive to leaving the workforce with the intention of returning in several years time. Knowledge sharing and good communication are essential to the productivity and success of a team, and such things as part-time work or working from home would be perceived as barriers to this. Thus, if a project manager were given the choice of taking a part-time consultant or a full-time consultant onto their project, they would be more likely to take the full-time resource. As most projects are based on client sites, there is always pressure to maintain a professional manner, and so it may not be considered appropriate for a parent to take a child to work. Finally, although some consulting positions allow working from home for short periods, this would not be feasible for positions that require a lot of client contact, as is the case for most upper management positions. PricewaterhouseCoopers is taking steps towards making these options more accessible to consultants. There are some part-time consultants, and short-term flexible working arrangements can be made.

In spite of the barriers that still remain to be overcome, I believe I've made a great choice of career. I decided against a career in engineering because the engineering industry has been unable to really embrace female engineers as equals. During each of my work experiences, I met people who expressed surprise that I would want to be an engineer, and engineering companies seemed full of middle-aged men who were unable to appropriately deal with female engineers. This is possibly indicative of a conservative attitude, not just to women, but in general - encompassing, for instance, the attitudes towards hierarchy and ideas of how people should be managed as were exemplified by the attitude of the manager in my first work experience towards both myself and the technicians under his supervision. Engineering companies often pay lip service to notions of affirmative action and are attempting to employ more women in engineering roles. This would be admirable,

except I believe that the particular ways in which women have been singled out for special treatment further demonstrate their outmoded attitudes towards women. The problem with my work experiences was not that opportunities were denied me, or that people were unpleasant to me, but rather that I was singled out for unnecessary and unwarranted treatment on the assumption that I needed it. I believe people should to be treated according to their ability, and so people treating me in a particular way because I am a woman has always annoyed me. Consulting seems to be free of this attitude towards women (at least for young consultants), and I believe that is the reason why it is far ahead of engineering in terms of the employment and treatment of young women. My hope is that by the time I am interested in starting a family, the industry will have taken further steps to address the problems of balancing family and career, and broken down the perception that alternatives to full-time work are inaccessible.