

Empowerment Award Highly Commended: Connexis

Video Link <https://vimeo.com/137552483>

Becoming visible: Connexis' innovative approach to attracting women to the infrastructure industry

In an industry that has been traditionally dominated by males, Connexis is working full heartedly to not only recruit but to also retain women in the technical trade and infrastructure industry. Looking around the infrastructure industry over the last 5 years, you would not be hard-pressed to find programmes seeking to recruit women. What distinguishes Connexis from other organisations focusing on female recruitment, is their willingness to understand the barriers that keep women outside the technical trades. They do not simply want to recruit women- they want to want to retain them, give them the resources/training that will ensure their success, and systematically work to make the entire industry inclusive.

Connexis is the Industry Training Organisation (ITO) for New Zealand's infrastructure industries: Civil Infrastructure, Electricity Supply & Telecommunications, and Water. For the past four years, they have been working with their industry members to address the gender imbalance and to ultimately increase the recruitment and retention of females through their Ultimit Programme.

This programme was not approached lightly: the organisation has committed a large portion of resources to research and understand the barriers that have stifled female recruitment in the past. They have also to explore the key factors that had led to women being successfully recruited and retained; after looking at these women, Connexis soon realized that the majority of their successful recruits were referred through someone they knew, whether it was their friend or family member. Female recruits, before the launch of the Ultimit Programme, were successfully recruited because somebody presented them with the opportunity to consider a career in the technical trades. The people at Connexis realised that if they were to increase the number of female recruits, they needed to mimic this process and refer women who may have not considered or been aware of the opportunities in the field.

From this came the launch of 'Girls in Hi-Vis' programme in August 2010, a product of Connexis' partnership with North power and Electrix. Through this initiative, Connexis aimed to understand the factors that influenced women to enter the industry and then actively identify, qualify and recruit 10 females and track their journey.

The idea of a "journey" is what defines the Ultimit Programme: beyond simply throwing money at a problem, Connexis seeks understanding through the tracking of their recruits in order to constantly improve and innovate their training process.

Through the pilot intake of their 'Girls in Hi-Vis' initiative, Connexis also identified the importance of recruiting multiple women at a time. They found that by recruiting a group of women rather than individuals, recruits would have a support group with shared understanding and encouragement. Connexis has since worked to ensure this type of recruitment in large organisations and is working towards providing support alternatives to women in smaller to medium size businesses with smaller recruitment intakes.

Through open days, boot camps, shadowing initiatives, training, and interviewing, the 'Girls in Hi-Vis' Initiative works to ensure that the best candidates are being selected for their potential and not simply for their gender. Connexis works tirelessly to avoid tokenism and to create meaningful change by recruiting women who enrich and diversify their trade.

The programme does not end after women have been successfully recruited; it is the second half of the Ultimit Programme that is the most crucial. The 'Women in Infrastructure' Initiative seeks to create a support community for these women in which they could offer mentorship, share, and celebrate successes through their journeys. This initiative works to ensure the success of the women who are recruited through the 'Girls in Hi-Vis' initiative and is especially crucial for those women who are the only females in their companies. This initiative will culminate at the Women in Infrastructure lunch which will feature guest speaker female NASA Astronaut, Wendy Lawrence, to share her experiences in a male dominated workforce. By profiling strong female role models, Connexis hopes to inspire women in infrastructure to succeed in the face of adversity.

Not only have new recruits seen the benefits of the Ultimit programme, but women who have been in the industry for many years have also seen a real change in their work environment. Holly Murphy, who was originally recruited through Ultimit and has been working as a Transmission Line Mechanic for the last five years, says "Ultimit has been good because it has made more of a big deal of women working in the industry by profiling and encouraging the role that we can play. It has helped because when I started no one was really used to having women in this industry. Now there are a few of us here at Electrix which is really cool".

Through the Ultimit Programme, Connexis is working to create a "new normal" in the infrastructure industry. By recruiting, researching, training, and supporting women through their journey, the Ultimit Programme is balancing the gender gap in the infrastructure industry and feeding into the talent pipeline. Their research and commitment to innovation in training is what distinguishes them and has led to their ultimate success as an industry trainer.