

Empowerment Award Entrant: Stronger Christchurch Infrastructure Rebuild Team (SCIRT)

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/141146058>

Building Back Better: A new lease of life for the city and for women in construction. It was 12 o'clock on a February afternoon in 2011 when the city of Christchurch was changed forever. It was on this afternoon that New Zealand's second largest city was devastated by a deadly 6.3 magnitude earthquake. The quake, and the aftershocks shook the city to its core; when the dust had settled, the lives of 185 people were lost and much of the city lay in ruin. But from the rubble, the resilience of Christchurch's people shone through; the people of Christchurch swore they would not only rebuild their beloved city, but they would rebuild it for the better.

The rebuild required both "outside of the box" thinking and Kiwi ingenuity: the sudden and unprecedented demand on the construction industry posed both substantial challenges and significant opportunities. There was no way that the existing workforce could undertake such a huge task; the rebuild depended on the utilisation of Christchurch's untapped labour pools.

One organisation took up the challenge: the Stronger Christchurch Infrastructure Rebuild (SCIRT), an alliance of five large construction companies (City Care, Downer, Fletcher, Fulton Hogan and McConnell Dowell) and three government 'owner participant' organisations (Christchurch City Council, Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA), New Zealand Transport Agency) set about to solve Christchurch's labour shortage. Through the organisation's openness "to new ways and other perspectives", they worked to develop a strategy to fill the labour gap by recruiting women.

This was, after all, a labour pool that was not only severely underrepresented in the construction industry, but also willing to explore the possibility that the rebuild offered an opportunity to move beyond the status quo and see construction roles as more than simply "jobs for the boys". The facts and the will were on their side but there was still work to be done; in 2013 there was only 13% female representation in professional engineering roles and an estimated 1% in crew and trades. Overall, the New Zealand construction industry was dominated by 8.4% male workers. In the face of such statistics, where most organisations saw a challenge, SCIRT saw potential.

In August 2013, SCIRT launched the SCIRT Women in Construction (SWIC) working group and set about establishing an aim to "raise the visibility of and enable women working in construction". By challenging biases, providing role models and exploring ways in which the construction industry could be more welcoming to women, SWIC worked to systematically change the demographic makeup of the construction and trades industries while simultaneously working as a catalyst for the reconstruction of Christchurch.

Every month the SWIC group meets to discuss and collaborate on ideas, strategy, tactics, and actions all aimed at increasing female representation in the industry. It is from these meetings, that a number of the group's key initiatives and philosophies have been formulated.

Firstly, the group set the goal of challenging the unconscious biases in the industry in order to create a welcoming message to women considering a career in construction. The most obvious barrier to this in the current system was the work attire provided: women who worked on site in operational roles had to wear men's work attire as that is all that was available!

This, from the SWIC perspective, represented an unconscious bias that encouraged the "men's work" stereotype in the industry. In November 2014, SCIRT successfully launched the new women's specific Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) clothing in conjunction with the Ministry for Women's employers' handbook.

The group also began to work collaboratively to challenge the expectations of gender and plan strategic initiatives. The Ministry of Women has identified gender expectations within the construction industry as a key barrier to gender balance.

SWIC addressed this by focusing on the lack of female role models in the industry: after analysing the SCIRT Communications photo library, they were shocked to find that there was only one image in the entire library that showed a woman working in the industry.

The shortage of examples for females to reference was alarming to SWIC members because it highlighted a major issue for female recruitment: how can you aspire to be something that you can't visualise?

SWIC got to work and over the past 18 months, the SCIRT photo library has intentionally focused on providing examples of women working in construction roles, to the point where there are now too many photos to count. Furthermore, the Communications team at SCIRT has sought out to profile female employees in organisational advertising, posters, presentation material etc. This initiative worked to create the "new normal" and to challenge expectations that construction was "men's work".

Through challenging biases, the focus on female role models and the exploration of the ways in which the construction industry could be more welcoming to women, SWIC has begun to create a "new normal" for the construction industry; a "normal" which empowers women, diversifies workplaces, and rebuilds a stronger and more equal Christchurch.