

Empowerment Award Winner:
Supreme Award Winner:
Jacobs Ltd.

Video Link <https://vimeo.com/104979421>

Diversity committee fosters greater equity in technical services industry.

Traditionally, engineering and science fields have tended to be dominated by men. While this trend has shifted somewhat in recent years with more female graduates coming through, the number of women in senior technical roles remains low.

Jacobs merged with Sinclair Knight Merz (SKM) in late 2013 to form one of the largest providers of technical, professional and construction service providers in the world. Jacobs employs approximately 70,000 employees across a range of technical sectors. The New Zealand office employs 370 staff within the engineering and science profession, delivering services across a number of sectors, including infrastructure, environment, resources and power.

The Engineering Consulting industry is a competitive one. There is currently a global shortage of engineers and other skilled staff, so it is critical to retain and develop good senior talent. The company also works to strongly encourage young people to consider careers with Jacobs in the areas of engineering and science. This is a strategy that a number of businesses in the technical sector have adopted in recent times to ensure their ongoing sustainability through carefully managed talent pipelines.

The business offers personal and professional development through five learning and development frameworks, encompassing programmes in intercultural awareness, unconscious bias and career planning. Staff are also supported to pursue further education and professional registration. They are also provided with language tuition when working with other countries and cultures. Formal mentoring programmes are targeted at graduates and leadership talent, while the culture of mentoring extends to all staff.

There has been an increasing focus within Jacobs on representing people from a diverse range backgrounds at senior levels, as the company recognises the important role intercultural awareness plays in improving business performance.

This broader focus on inclusion has grown from a strong focus on gender in earlier years. In 2006, the Women in Consulting (WiC) committee was established by predecessor SKM to address gender imbalance within the organisation. The goal of the group was to drive cultural change, educate staff, raise awareness and ensure consistency in the delivery of diversity policies across the business.

In 2010, the New Zealand WiC committee evolved into the Diversity Committee, after employees requested that the committee extend its work to those with different ethnicities, cultures, religions and ages. Jacobs' New Zealand workforce is hugely diverse. At the core of the group's ethos is the desire to promote an accepting, unbiased place to work.

A key focus of the New Zealand group is to promote a supportive professional environment that develops, engages and retains talented employees. It works to promote equality for all by promoting institutional change via a range of diverse perspectives – as women, Maori, representatives of different ethnicities, cultures and religions and as a cross-section of ages and roles within the workforce.

Committee Chair Ida Dowling explains, “As a group, we are responsible for identifying and implementing initiatives in collaboration with the regional leadership and human resources teams. We often act as advocates with senior management on issues such as pay equity or role appointments for individuals or groups within the organisation.”

The Diversity Committee has organised a range of events with the goal of increasing awareness of different perspectives in the workplace. It is hoped that efforts like these will promote the optimum professional development outcomes for all employees. Jacobs also wants to ensure that staff are upskilled on diversity within organisations. Funding is available for employees to attend professional development sessions and networking events, aimed at empowering all employees to learn about a range of diversity related issues.

One of its key Diversity and Inclusion strategies is the provision of flexible working arrangements including flexible hours, part-time work, working from home and the purchase of additional annual leave so employees can make time to care for their children or elderly relatives.

The Diversity Committee has continued to encourage better uptake of the company’s existing policies that have previously been under-utilised. These include flexible working hours and other measures to support families, as well as programmes that promote and develop intercultural awareness.

Business Development Leader for Rail in NZ and Australia and former NSA WiC Committee Chair Rowenna Walker says she is passionate about the business benefits of diversity. She also says that Jacobs’ diversity policy is fully supported by its leadership.

“During my time with the company, I have had two children, utilised the flexible work practices available and more importantly been considered for new roles whilst on maternity leave. This demonstrates that all my various managers supported my career development regardless of changes in my circumstance. I am keen to ensure that I continue to encourage and support those coming up through the business like those who helped me...through my behaviours, being a mentor, a sponsor and my continued involvement in the Diversity Committee.”

People at all levels have benefited from Jacobs’ flexible working practices, empowering people to choose how and when they work to accommodate the whole person in the workplace.

Civil Drafter Merci Martin joined the company as a cadet drafter at age 36 whilst studying at Unitec. She says of the company’s flexible approach, “Working part-time helped me ease back into working. For somebody who was a stay-at-home mum and a solo parent, it’s a very daunting thing even just thinking about studying, let alone going back into the workforce full-time.”

Merci noticed that she was also readily accepted as a woman in what was typically a male-dominated environment in the past.

“You don’t feel like you have to prove yourself as a woman, you just have to prove yourself as a person who works hard. That’s the beauty of it. The balance is already there. A lot of people who are younger probably wouldn’t realise that because they’re probably so used to it anyway - it’s a special thing,” she explains.

As part of an expanding global organisation, Jacobs is integrating new approaches from the wider business world with a strong emphasis on networking and inclusion. It’s a great time for the company to acknowledge and celebrate the successes of their diversity programme thus far, while recognising that inclusion and empowering people to flourish has never been a more vital task.