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Annual Subscription
UK and Europe £160, €230
Rest of the world US$270

International Mining (ISSN No: 1747-146X) is published monthly by Team Publishing Ltd, GBR and is distributed in the USA by Asendia USA, 17B South Middlesex Avenue, Monroe NJ 08831 and additional mailing offices. Periodicals postage paid at New Brunswick NJ. POSTMASTER: send address changes to International Mining, 17B South Middlesex Avenue, Monroe NJ 08831

Printed by The Manson Group, St Albans

ISSN 1747 -146X

IM uses, as preference, SI units throughout, so, for example, all tonnes are metric unless otherwise stated. All dollars are US unless otherwise stated

Lasting change: Improving gender diversity in the mining industry

With low levels of female participation in the mining industry, business as usual is no longer an option.

Calls for gender diversity in companies abound, at every level – executive management, on boards of directors – and in every region of the world. Women and men are impatient for results that will lead to truly diverse work places. Yet many company executives and decision makers struggle to make progress. The business case for diversity is a no-brainer. The best performing companies have more women in leadership posts. According to a 2011 Catalyst study, Fortune 500 firms with the most female board members outperform those with the least by 26% on return on invested capital and 16% on return on sales. (Note that some studies are questioning these findings.) And it's good for the whole workforce when all talent is recognised and developed on merit.

The mining industry is attempting to improve gender diversity and failing: according to PwC's Mining for talent 2015 report of the top 500 mining companies surveyed, only 7.9% of board members are female. The number of women in executive management pipelines is actually falling.

Getting organisations within the mining industry to look, act and be more diverse will take the commitment of every person – not just the senior level executives. Based on the current literature, there are some specific actions that have worked and if instituted broadly, could move the industry towards a more diverse workforce:

In her May 26, 2015 article in *The Guardian*, Jean Martin suggests that women aren't hindered by a 'glass ceiling', it's the small, day-to-day circumstances and decisions that snowball to the point of slowing and sometimes even stopping a woman's career progression. Fixing the little things like the number of stretch assignments offered to women makes a difference. According to Martin, whether consciously or unconsciously, some managers decide that women don't want stretch assignments and tell themselves that "an employee who just had a child, probably doesn't want a job that requires travel." This unconscious bias takes the decision away from the employee.

Promotions are another area where small fixes have brought results. Many companies have one annual round of promotions and women are statistically far likelier to miss these opportunities due to maternity leaves and the time before and after that absence. Making the timing for promotions more flexible can fix the cumulative effect of delayed promotions and bolster diverse succession pipelines.

Job shadowing is widely used for training purposes, yet it is also an effective tactic for women to gain experience and build networks. It works like this: a senior level staff member takes a junior person along to a meeting – for example a board or risk meeting. Gaining an understanding of how risk policies work or seeing – first-hand – corporate governance in action is a resume building experience that offers insight into how senior executives think, negotiate, and network – all skills that take years to develop! The shadower expands her network with people who may later be her advocate or mentor. The person being shadowed gains a different perspective and the chance to ready a junior employee for more responsibility.

While mentors are important to career advancement, an effective sponsor goes far beyond feedback and advice giving. Sponsors use their influence to help protégés advance and take an active role in the protégé's career progression by advocating for new opportunities and stretch assignments. Studies confirm that women are less likely than their male counterparts to have a sponsor. According to research completed by the Center for Work-Life Policy, a New York-based think tank, sponsorship increases stretch assignments, promotions, and pay raises by up to 30% —an outcome that mentoring alone cannot match. The good news: companies in many industries are using sponsorship programs to make a step change and diversify the makeup of their upper management teams.

Having a pipeline of strong, diverse candidates helps ensure a company can confront the future. George Halvorson, former CEO of Kaiser Permanente, has a winning formula: he made sure that for all senior positions there were at least three potential successors in development. His rule was that no more than two of the three candidates could have the same characteristics. This approach allowed him to make promotion decisions based on merit and develop a diverse group of senior leaders as role models.

To make a difference, tactics implemented to improve diversity must be offered to ALL employees – not just the group whose participation you're trying to effect. There is no silver bullet – only silver buckshot.

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