

Mining Magazine

Getting to Grips with Gender Equality

While there are still significant strides to be made, mining is slowly losing its 'boys' club' image. Carly Leonida asks three female executives for their thoughts on the state of play.

Carly Leonida | 11 Jul 2016

There's no doubt that over the past five years the mining industry has made noticeable progress at advancing and better integrating female employees. Yet the challenge to increase the number of women in leadership and other high level decision-making roles remains.

The Global Gender Gap Report 2014, published by the World Economic Forum, estimates that global gender parity in the workplace will take until 2095 to achieve.

"That's 80 years until companies and governments are led equally by men and women – a snail's pace!" Resa Furey, market analyst at MWH, now part of mining consultancy Stantec tells Mining Magazine.

She continues: "Last November, the newly elected prime minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, was asked why he appointed a gender balanced cabinet. He answered, "Because it's 2015." It's now 2016 and we need more leaders with that same attitude."

Improving the situation in mining requires the commitment of every person – not just the industry's senior level executives. It will require focused effort, resources (time and money) and individuals who are vested, and willing to be held accountable, for achieving meaningful results and lasting outcomes.

Furey is a passionate supporter of the women in mining movement. Having worked in the industry for the past seven years, first in marketing and now in market analysis, strategy and business development, she understands the importance of support at every level throughout a company.



"The role that mentoring and sponsorship play in improving career outcomes for women in mining cannot be under emphasised," she tells MM. "I count myself as one of the lucky women who has worked with a number of people who have taken an interest in my career, skill set and what I bring as a unique contributor in an often highly technical industry. Working directly with those individuals has made a difference for me professionally – and of course personally."

Furey has been a member of the Women in Mining (WIM) networking group in the US for four years and currently serves on the organisation's board. "That experience has provided leadership opportunities, and has expanded my professional network by connecting me to supportive individuals, primarily (but not only) women who work in mining. WIM has opened different doors for me – and open doors mean new opportunities," she adds.

Nichole McCulloch, managing partner for energy and natural resources at the Ashton Partnership, and head of WIM UK's international affairs, reports a similar experience: "I've worked in the mining industry for a little over six years having come from a more retail background. I found several individuals within the industry who were extremely supportive and instrumental in my development and integration into the sector. They were not formal mentors, but gave me confidence and an insight into how mining companies operate which have allowed me to thrive," she explains.

Beyond WIM, there are many organisations that focus on preparing women for meaningful leadership positions. Women are ready, companies want to capitalise on this motivated pool of talent and now the industry as a whole needs to focus and implement.

Across the board

It's important to remember that gender equality is not a plight unique to the mining industry.

Denise Johnson, group president at Caterpillar, one of mining's biggest OEMs, brings some perspective to the debate.

"I spent more than 20 years in the automotive industry before coming to Caterpillar," she says. "But there are certainly strong parallels between the industries. In general, I believe that engineering, heavy construction

and mining are now working with more focus to create inclusive cultures that recognise the value of diverse points of view and experience.

"It's great that we are seeing an increasing number of female graduates from mining and engineering schools. But we need more! Building awareness about mining as a career is helping boost numbers. We also see our customers increasing their focus on diversity and inclusion, in ways such as broadening their leader experience through university executive development programmes."

Johnson began her career at General Motors and worked there for 22 years before joining Caterpillar. "One of the key decisions I made early in my career was taking the opportunity to do graduate work in the Leaders for Global Operations programme at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)," she says.

"I took a leave of absence from my job and moved from Michigan to Boston, but it was one of the best decisions I ever made. I was able to earn a double master's degree in mechanical engineering and business administration. That advanced learning gave me a strong foundation for the critical thinking, business acumen and leadership qualities you need to be successful in today's world."



Johnson adds. “For companies, making opportunities like this available to women is so important in building a more diverse – and skilled – employee pipeline.”

Breaking down barriers

There are multiple reasons why women often overlook careers in the mining industry, some of which can be overcome with relative ease, although others are more ingrained.

“I think like all industries, the ability to balance having a family and give 100% of yourself to your role is difficult,” McCulloch says. “What makes this particularly challenging within mining is the often high demand for international travel and remote locations of some postings. I also think there is a legacy perception of the industry that it is an ‘old boys’ club’.”

Furey agrees: “For people who don’t work in the mining industry there’s a perception that mining means coal-covered, hard-hatted men, operating heavy machinery. It’s hard for a young college graduate to see herself in that job.”

Much mine-site work does involve hard hats and steel toed boots. However, there are a growing number of roles at mines that make use of computers rather than shovels, and the jobs that support these smart solutions are attractive to skilled graduates of both genders.

One of the biggest challenges is raising awareness. “I recently heard a woman who is a top executive at a large, global mining company describe her career in the industry. A key thing that struck me was that she said she had been exposed to mining her whole life because her family was in the industry,” Johnson says.

“She has a degree in mining engineering, which is still relatively rare today for a woman. I don’t think many young women would even think to consider mining as a career if they weren’t exposed to it at a young age.

“It’s important that we, as an industry, advocate for the great things we make possible around the world and for the career opportunities in mining and mining technology. We’re on the leading edge of things like sustainability and automation, but unless we get out and tell our story, especially in the schools, we won’t be first to mind when choosing a career.”

Kudos where it’s due, some mining companies have excellent programmes for women, for example the Creating Choices programme at Goldcorp.



However, the importance of starting early, as Johnson suggests, cannot be underestimated.

Caterpillar works with more than 50 schools and universities on talent development and research. “What’s important is to help students see the possibilities of a career in mining. The work miners do makes the daily conveniences we enjoy possible. There are not many jobs where you can look around your house and work space and literally have played a role in the creation of nearly everything you see. Miners can do that!” Johnson adds proudly.

Of course, many of the barriers to entering the mining industry are the same for both women and men: the cyclical nature of the business for one. Hierarchical cultures and vertical company structures are often difficult for women and millennials to break into, much less navigate.

Furey says: “The fact that mining isn’t seen as an industry at the cutting edge of innovation and technology doesn’t put it high on the list of exciting, trail-blazing and therefore ‘must-enter’ industries. Yet the industry has a lot to offer and doesn’t always tout what it offers: remedying that could increase attractiveness.”

Likely leaders

One area in which women are very obviously missing is company leadership. According to the 2015 report “Mining for Talent: a study of women on boards in the mining industry” produced by WIM UK and PwC, women occupy only 7.9% of board positions in the top 500 globally listed mining companies.

There’s a saying, “if you can see it, you can be it”, and with so few women in the top positions in the mining industry, female role models are few and far between.

“This dearth of women in high positions fails to feed the imaginations of up-and-coming women with examples of what is possible. Breaking that cycle should be at the top of the priority list for a mining company/ vendor/ service provider interested in diversifying their workforce,” says Furey. “Sharing successes and programmes that work is crucial.”

Historically, there has been a low percentage of women hiring into mining companies. There are many factors contributing to this issue and often, the answers can be country- or region-specific.

“We find that countries that have mandated or stronger targets around women in board positions often have a negative effect on women in executive roles, as they tend to leave these roles to pursue a full time portfolio career,” McCulloch explains.

Additionally, many women leave employment at one time or another to start a family. This can often affect their overall career trajectory by limiting the types of positions they choose to take based on time or geography. This also means some women do not come back to full time employment at all, opting out of a certain career or industry in search of more flexible work schedules.

As such, a key challenge for the industry will be exploring how the work environment can be adapted to meet the work/life balance expectations of an evolving workforce.

“At Caterpillar, our highest percentage of women are new hires,” Johnson says. “It’s at the middle management to department head level where we have work to do. Without question, we must improve the gender balance at all levels of the organisation.

“While we have intentionally focused past efforts to leverage diversity on our most senior leadership positions, we now recognise and understand the value of broadening this strategy to encompass our total pipeline.”

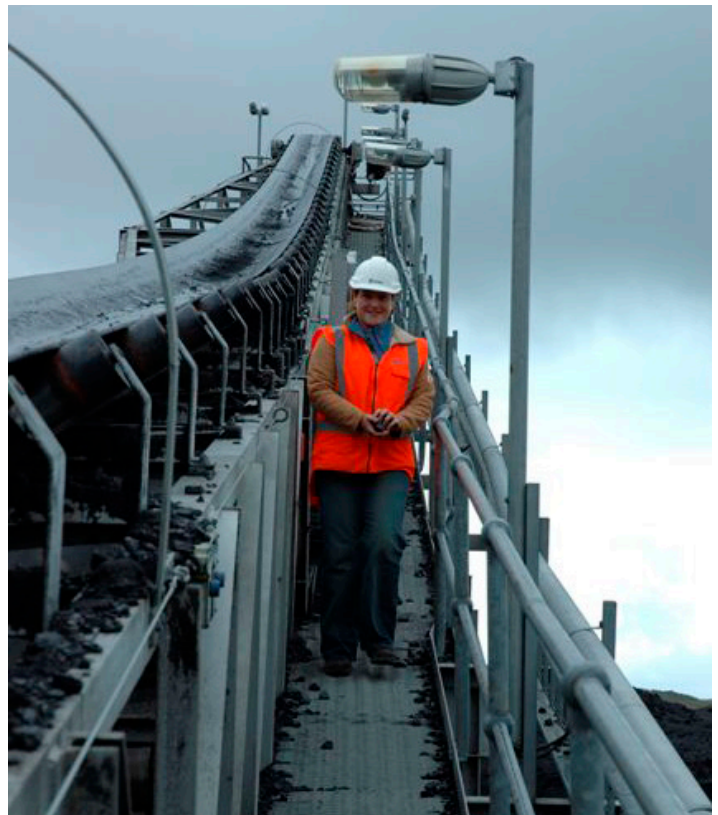
Currently, about 20% of the Caterpillar workforce is female. However, the company aims to achieve an industry benchmark of 30% women in its workforce and leadership roles by 2022.

“It’s an aggressive goal, to be sure. But it is critical that we have a diverse and deep talent pool to develop and draw from for the future,” Johnson adds.

Talent shortage

And what of the global skills shortage that the mining industry faces; surely that will help boost the number of female employees as miners, vendors and consultants alike cast their recruitment nets wider?

“I do feel the impending skill shortage will force companies to think more broadly about diversity across a multitude of disciplines, whether it be gender, race or professional background,” says McCulloch. “The industry historically has mandated that executives need to have come from a mining background to be successful in the industry, or have significant on-the-ground or site-based experience, precluding a lot of female talent.



“This is changing, and the companies who are embracing it will start to have a stronger competitive advantage. As we continue to work in a rapidly changing commercial environment, the recognition of skill sets from outside the industry can provide organisations with a strategic competitive advantage by capitalising on a range of diverse thoughts and experiences.”

Johnson speaks from experience: “We need to be open and active in recruiting and creating inclusive work environments for all types of talent. It’s not just because of a labour shortage, though. It’s because we know diverse companies are better companies that produce better results. Our industry needs technology leaders. We need innovators. And we need the very best minds available to push us to the next growth cycle.”

Furey believes that the skills shortage in mining has already encouraged companies to diversify their work forces. “To attract talent, companies in the mining industry must consider new types of jobs in terms of location, work schedules, and skill sets,” she explains. “While a traditional model of weeks on- and off-site may not work for women with young families, remote surveillance and virtual working are increasingly alternatives companies can employ.”

Indeed, thinking outside of the box in terms of resource companies’ needs today can create new opportunities that are more attractive to anyone with a life outside of work.

Looking to the future

While there may not be adequate awareness of the types of roles and career fulfilment available to women who chose to enter mining at the moment, there has been significant progress over the past five years.

For example, in the US, the Women’s Mining Coalition allows members to advocate with legislators about the importance of environmentally responsible mining. In April, nine women from Caterpillar’s Surface Mining & Technology division participated in a ‘fly in’ to Washington DC that resulted in 213 face-to-face meetings with more than 300 US House and Senate contacts.

“Although the discussions weren’t specifically focused on women’s roles in the mining industry, Caterpillar participants represented product groups, go-to-market regions, technology development, sales/marketing and human resources,” Johnson says.

“In a very real way, legislators were able to hear first-hand from female experts in the mining industry, who were in jobs that they might not expect. It was also a great development opportunity for the participants, providing an understanding of a different aspect of the business, as well as networking experience and a deepened understanding of the importance of the work we do.”

McCulloch sums up the situation with finesse: “I think the industry is starting to do a better job at the university level, engaging women into more technical degree programmes, but that engagement needs to start at a much younger age.

“I also think that wider education of the roles women can play in the industry outside of the more technical disciplines needs to be addressed. Law, finance, sustainability and strategy are roles which women from any professional background can enter the industry and make a significant impact.”