



WOMEN: TAKE YOUR PLACE IN THE WORLD OF ENGINEERING

There are still far more men than women in the field, but we at Cougar are doing our part to change that.

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At Cougar Automation, we pride ourselves in our inclusive workplace. We put great effort towards maintaining an environment where all voices are heard, skills and intellect are valued and fostered, and personal commitments and interests respected and given time for. So, as we're going through a period of growth and recruitment, we recently took the opportunity to reflect on what more we can do to encourage women to join our ranks and participate in the creative and exciting world of engineering.

As of 2018, only about 12% of engineers in Britain were female. While that's up from about 9% in 2015, we still have a long way to go. The stats within our own organisation roughly mirror current figures. It's not for lack of trying. This year, we put out a call for young people to join our degree apprenticeship program that offers computer engineering training at no cost, all while getting a salary, benefits and vacation time. Of the 10 applicants, all were male. When we participated in career days at schools, all who approached us for information were male.

A century ago, a group of women who had held engineering and technical jobs during World War I crusaded to continue in those roles after the war by forming the Womens' Engineering Society (WES) in the UK. They had found themselves suddenly faced with an atmosphere that they were no longer good enough for roles they had successfully upheld. Women weren't being accepted into education and training programs. Married women faced the added obstacle that many in society thought they should confine their abilities to managing a house and family.

It was through the efforts of groups such as the WES and the suffrage movement that the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 was passed. Women now had legally protected access to education and protection in the workplace. But despite this, science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) continued to be subjects considered by many to be the realm of men.

Recent efforts to encourage girls and young women into STEM subjects are seeing some positive change, although it remains slow. Such efforts are necessary in order to ensure the UK maintains the talent pool needed to stay competitive internationally.

All this got us wondering what more we could do to encourage more women into the field, either working as engineers or bringing other needed skills to engineering organisations.



Lin Duo, Project Engineer, Bristol office

Lin Duo, a Project Engineer at our Bristol-based office feels encouragement of STEM needs to start at a very young age. "It's not the brain that's different between boys and girls. It's their awareness and experiences around these subjects. Girls and young women need more encouragement by parents, teachers and others around them early on. We can use books, games, stories, toys, costumes and TV programs to encourage their interest."

Nickoo Bayat, a Project Engineer in our Cheshire office, was educated and later worked in engineering in Iran. "In Iran, women have been working hard to prove

themselves in engineering and technology fields, and they're being successful. In the UK, girls have so many opportunities available to them, and should be encouraged by everyone to take advantage of them. Parents too need to trust girls' abilities and let them show their strengths."

When women do choose to enter into engineering education programs, they do very well. According to information from Engineering UK 2018 and WES, 79.8% of female engineering students get a First or Upper Second, compared to 74.6% of male students.



Nickoo Bayat, Project Engineer,
Cheshire office



Christine Hiskey, Safety, Health, Environment & Quality
(SHEQ) Coordinator, Central office

"Engineering and technology should be brought into school curriculum in a way that links with real jobs, giving girls and young women a broader sense of what's involved and the role they can play," says Christine Hiskey, Safety, Health, Environment & Quality (SHEQ) Coordinator at our Central office.

Christine also sees a role for business in the education process. "Schools need to let businesses have a greater presence, give talks about the type of work available, offer students work trials, and help girls and young women understand the value they will bring to engineering and how they can progress in their careers."

"Businesses also need to ensure they present female role models, so girls and young women can better see themselves in those jobs and feel able to ask questions from a female perspective. For example, that means having more women present at career fairs, putting recruitment information out on mediums used by women and also offering apprenticeship opportunities to those who take a career break or even wish to change their career at a later stage in life."

Job flexibility was one of the key reasons Suzanne Wilson, a Project Engineer in our Hampshire office, came to work with Cougar Automation. She manages a successful engineering job and a busy personal life. "I considered options closer to where I live, but I'm really happy here. Cougar agreed very family-friendly terms. They understand that everyone who works here — men and women — have other commitments, and so they're flexible with work hours and their work-from-home policy."

We asked ourselves if job flexibility was enough; have attitudes changed enough in society and in the workplace for more women to feel comfortable taking an engineering and technology-related roles?

"Absolutely," says Suzanne. "The 'man in charge' attitude is a relic of the past for 99% of the people I come into contact with. People are interested in talking to the person with the technical knowledge they need. That's who they have confidence in."



Suzanne Wilson, Project Engineer,
Hampshire office



Katherine Hooper, Administrator, Central office

Katherine Hooper, an Administrator in our Central office, agrees. "Attitudes are changing, and as more women become visible in the industry, attitudes will change faster."

Those women who have entered the profession are seeing huge advantages over other career choices. Engineering students are second only to medics in securing full-time jobs and earning good salaries. And they seem happy in their work. In a 2013 survey by the Royal Academy of Engineering, more than 80% of female engineers are either happy or extremely happy with their career choice. In the same survey, 98% said they find their job rewarding, with 80% indicating the reward came from the project work they had helped to succeed.

"We spend so much time at work that it should be an enjoyable and challenging place to be," says Cheryl. "Cougar have most definitely worked hard to provide an environment that their staff enjoy being a part of."

At Cougar Automation, project work is a team effort completed in an open environment in which people have fun, feel valued and equal, and share in decision making. We don't have departments that cut people off from one another. As every project is different, each one needs the right leader for it to have the best chance to succeed. That's why everyone here is involved in choosing who leads a project. We also share everything about the business, including management accounts and customer feedback. As a result, we've created a rather unique culture that thrives on diversity, inclusion and equality. We know these drive innovation and growth.

We've been working to promote our industry and the opportunities it affords. Computer engineering in particular is a relatively future-proof profession. But we're in an industry that's not as good as many others at letting people know what exactly we do, how we contribute to the world, and how rewarding and creative our work is. At Cougar Automation, we're working to understand the issues and barriers women face, and help break down stereotypes. This involves not only having women engineers as role models, but having everyone at Cougar Automation be champions for change.

Women considering working in an engineering field should be aware of the ways to gain a foothold on their careers. "If you're looking at paying £36K in university fees alone, think again and consider an apprenticeship," suggests Suzanne. "Many young people think the only way in is via university. But now there are degree apprenticeships. You gain hands-on, paid experience then complete a short applied degree program at university while still being paid. I only wish I had done that!"

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