

Engineering companies urged to make room for the 'gadget girls'

March 9 2006

The classic stereotype of an engineer – a man who is brilliant at and passionate about technology, but not so good at dealing with people – bears little resemblance to actual engineers or their work, according to new research from the University of Edinburgh. These stereotypes hamper the engineering profession's efforts to recruit women, says Dr Wendy Faulkner who carried out the study.

Dr Faulkner, who interviewed and observed 66 men and women engineers working in a range of industries, says: "Women and men engineers alike get excited about technology –even though fewer of the women have a 'tinkerer' background. There are 'gadget girls' as well as 'boys and their toys' in engineering. At the same time, many different types of men and women enjoy engineering work – very few fit the classic stereotype.

She adds: "In practice, engineering encompasses a wide variety of jobs and roles. It is a 'broad church' with room for a diverse range of people. Yet the image of engineering – and often the culture – remains a narrowly technical, 'nuts and bolts' one.

"Retention is as important as recruitment –many of those women who do complete engineering degrees don't go onto engineering jobs or leave the industry after only a few years," says Dr Faulkner. "Part of the issue is that women who enter engineering have to become 'one of the lads' in order to fit in. Many subtle aspects of the culture, which may appear trivial individually, when taken as a whole have a 'dripping tap' effect –

making it harder for women to belong, and get on in engineering."

The study shows in detail how topics of conversation, humour and social activities often reflect men's interest and ways of bonding. This can leave women on the margins socially, and make it difficult for women to break into the 'inner circles' that influence how the job gets done and who gets promoted.

"By contrast, engineering workplace cultures accommodate a range of men – laddish blokes, family men, pranksters, macho men, nerdy men, urbane men, genteel men – and so they are likely to feel comfortable to the great majority of men," says Dr Faulkner.

"If more women are to stay and progress in engineering workplaces, there is a strong business case for employers to introduce sustained and sensitive diversity training, to raise awareness of these kind of issues and to nurture more 'inclusive' workplace cultures in which everyone is comfortable," says Dr Faulkner.

Source: University of Edinburgh

Citation: Engineering companies urged to make room for the 'gadget girls' (2006, March 9)
retrieved 18 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2006-03-companies-urged-room-gadget-girls.html>

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