

# **INCREASING THE DIVERSITY OF THE MINING INDUSTRY WORKFORCE – STRATEGIES FOR EMPLOYERS.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The AusIMM Women in Mining Network (WIMNet) has recently distributed a survey to key stakeholders in the Australian mining and exploration industry. Responses show that there is lively debate in the industry on the issue of diversity in the workforce, and that a majority of employers support the idea of increasing diversity. The AusIMM also recognises the advantages of diversity in the workforce (see The AusIMM Policy on Equal Opportunity and Diversity).

It is not easy to make overnight changes in the industry and it can be difficult to balance employer's needs with ideal workforce practices. However, feedback from employers has demonstrated some strategies that work well for both employers and employees. WIMNet offer some of these strategies and additional ideas for debate and consideration in the following pages. We hope to promote discussion of the issues that arise in the transition from a historically homogenised workforce to one which better reflects the balance of the Australian community<sup>1</sup>. We welcome feedback on this paper and any related issues. Feedback can be addressed to [policy@ausimm.com.au](mailto:policy@ausimm.com.au) or mailed to Brigette Hall, AusIMM, PO Box 660, Carlton South, Vic 3053. Discussion is also welcome at the WIMNet website chat room; <http://www.ausimm.com.au/chat/ChatMain.asp>

## **THE CURRENT WORKFORCE**

Women currently make up around 10% of the mining industry workforce (ABS 2001 census), compared to 45 % of the workforce as a whole. While we do not have figures for the ethnic background of the mining industry workforce, personal experiences indicate that the professional workforce may tend to be more Anglo-Saxon in background than the Australian population as a whole.

## **BENEFITS OF DIVERSITY**

- Discrimination based on gender, marital status, sexual orientation, race, creed or colour is unprofessional and is illegal in Australia. Few in the mining industry today would admit that they consciously discriminate against any group, but workplace culture and working conditions may inadvertently lead to subconscious discrimination. This may lead to illegal actions (see for example Pattenden 1998 p42). All employers should be vigilant to ensure that unconscious discrimination does not harm their operations. Actively encouraging diversity helps first to highlight unconscious discrimination and then to eliminate it.
- Diversity can enhance innovation through bringing together different perspectives and ideas to a problem. In the mining industry this is particularly valuable in exploration, research and equipment design

- Diversity makes good sense for business profitability. There is evidence to suggest that effective diversity management strategies correlate strongly with, and may impact both significantly and beneficially on a company's bottom line – the positive effects are tangible and measurable. In the USA, a study conducted by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission found that, of Standard and Poors top 500 organizations, those that ranked in the top fifth of compliance with EEO regulatory requirements had an average stock return of 18.3%. In comparison, organizations in the lower fifth experienced an average stock return of just 7.9%<sup>ii</sup>.

## **DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT**

Diversity management “accepts the need to value the contribution people from diverse backgrounds can make to productivity and international competitiveness”<sup>iii</sup>. Founded on the principles of Equal Employment Opportunity, effective diversity management has been linked in a recent survey of Australian business to higher employee morale, improved public image, a more productive workforce and more creative problem solving<sup>iv</sup>. Diversity management emerged in the United States in the early 1990s and was in part a consequence of dissatisfaction with the former change model of Affirmative Action. Affirmative Action was primarily a legislative system. It was intended to correct the imbalance induced by decades of social injustice against minorities and women. But Affirmative Action, in both the USA and Australia, came to be associated with excessive coercion and has been accused of advocating reverse discrimination.

Another attempt to legislate for increased diversity is now taking place in South Africa. The new South African Mining Charter<sup>v</sup> is legislation designed to improve diversity and redress historic injustice. The Charter includes much publicised legislated target levels for mine ownership by previously disadvantaged people. It also aims for 40% of mine management to come from previously disadvantaged groups, and 10% female involvement in the industry. The charter is well intended, although regrettably legislation is not always appropriate to achieve such aims. South Africa is acknowledged from its recent history to be a special case, but even so the Mining Charter risks creating the same type of resentment caused by Affirmative Action.

Diversity management, on the other hand, is not oriented specifically towards redress of endemic discrimination but instead “centres on benefits to the organization from having a membership that mirrors the external labor force”<sup>vi</sup>. Free from the emotive baggage that Affirmative Action attracted, diversity management is becoming an accepted and credible methodology by those employment systems embracing the principles of meritocracy. This does, of course, still entail redress of those structural and ideological factors, which continue to underpin discrimination, in its various manifestations, in the workplace

All mining industry employers are encouraged to implement a planned, effective, diversity management strategy. The WIMNet has surveyed Australian mining companies on their diversity policies.<sup>vii</sup> Around half of the 20 companies that have

responded to date have a formal diversity policy. The majority of companies agreed that increasing workforce diversity was important for them. Reasons given included,

- “Potential to develop enhanced emotional intelligence plus create a more balanced workforce”
- Promotes better work environment and retention of staff
- Diversity brings various methods of working, experience and expertise to the workplace, thereby enhancing work practices and productivity

## **STRATEGIES**

The WIMNet regularly receives questions and feedback from mining professionals currently working in the industry. Based on this feedback, and the collective professional experience of the WIMNet members, the following strategies should assist employers to increase diversity in their workforce.

### CULTURAL ISSUES

The mining industry is generally accepted to be a conservative, male oriented work culture. As an example, until very recently it was common to see pin-ups of women on crib room walls, although this has long been unacceptable in both work and public places. Such practices created a culture where, even if harassment and discrimination did not exist, there was frequently a perception that they did, and this impression persists today.

While changing a culture will never prove easy, organisational practice such as defining and promoting professional standards, encouraging teamwork and respect between employees will make the workplace more pleasant, efficient and inclusive. Such practice has the potential to help promote a safety culture by engendering greater cooperativeness between all employees.

It is critical that employers should continually review their EEO policies and procedures and ensure that they are relevant and effective in all workplaces.

Employers should consider how they assist new employees to adapt to the workplace culture. Useful techniques to assist a smooth transition into the culture may include a ‘buddy’ system, or series of one on one interviews with new employees.

Mentoring is regarded positively by the majority of mining professionals, and may be particularly helpful for any employee who considers him or herself to be in a minority. Employers may wish to actively encourage workplace mentoring, and may also assist the process by providing suitable guidance to both mentor and mentee.

### EMPLOYMENT CONDITIONS

- Long working hours

The 2001 Australian census showed the mining industry has the longest average working hours (Financial Review 18/6/03). Long working hours, in the form of regular long shifts and/or long working weeks, limit the pool of potential employees to those without family or cultural/religious commitments. This directly inhibits diversity in the workforce. Many mining sites, particularly Long Distance Commute (LDC) sites, incorporate long working hours as a standard employment practice, generally rewarding employees for the long hours through better pay. While in many cases this cannot be avoided without great economic cost, employers should consider that there will also be a cost in limiting the pool of willing employees. There will also be a cost if trained, skilled employees are lost, whether through burn out, changed preferences or changed circumstances, quite apart from the costs and safety issues associated with overtired and stressed employees.

Kathryn Heiler recently raised some of these points in her report on the impact of extended shiftwork in the Tasmanian mining industry<sup>viii</sup>. A personal view of the effects of long working hours, in particular 12 hour shifts on long LDC rosters, has also been given recently by Potts & Potts (2003). Serious consideration should be given to reducing standard weekly working hours where possible, and ensuring that overtime is so far as possible completely voluntary. This will encourage a win-win situation for employer and employee – those that want the financial benefits that come with longer hours can choose to do so, whilst others may choose not to. In addition, the costs of losing skilled employees should be weighed against the costs of a strategy of a longer working week.

Where it is not practical to reduce standard working hours, strategies that may broaden the appeal of working conditions on site include:

- Flexible rosters, especially on LDC sites. Potts & Potts (op cit) suggest a shorter 5 days on 2 days off than the standard 14on/7off. Where possible employees should be given a choice of roster length (other options include 10 days on 4 days off, or the 'part time' option of, for example 7 days on 7 days off). In addition employers should be sympathetic to requests for short-term roster changes to accommodate personal circumstances.
- Job sharing/part time work options. Two employees each working 30 hours per week may be far more effective than one working 55 hours per week, and the cost differential may be negligible.
- Minimising the number of employees on regular 12 hour shifts (eg do all maintenance staff need to be on the same 12 hour shifts as operators?).

The common theme to these suggestions is that to encourage a diversity of employees, it may be necessary to offer a diversity of working hours and roster patterns.

## FAMILY ISSUES

Many women, and indeed some men who commence work in the mining industry and leave to assume family and/or parental responsibilities often choose not to return to the industry. The remote nature of many mining sites

creates additional difficulties for employers wishing to encourage those people with family and parental responsibilities to return to the industry. However, some issues can be addressed as outlined below.

- Flexibility of Work Opportunities

In many cases, people who have left the industry to assume family and parental responsibilities, especially women with young children, find their previous employment (eg on LDC, line supervision etc) may not be possible as a part time role. However these employees have many skills and also have a good working knowledge of the company's operations. Innovative employers may find that former full-time employees may be used for short-term research projects, data collation and analysis in their field of expertise, government and community liaison etc. Modern communication facilities means that many functions (data analysis, ore reserves, engineering design etc) formerly performed on site now may also be carried out remotely, often at lower cost. Offering such work to staff formerly employed on an LDC site benefits both employer and employee. Continuing employment in a consulting, part-time role or even on a casual basis, encourages those employees who have left the industry to assume family responsibilities to maintain and develop their skills, whilst keeping in touch with the industry and their employer's operations. Continuing employment in this way will often lead to a resumption of full time employment at a later date.

Similarly many employees working long hours and unsociable shift patterns prior to taking on parental responsibilities, particularly women with young children, may be willing to consider a return to work after maternity/paternity if there is a possibility of reduced hours, different or more flexible shifts. They may be willing to consider returning to work in these circumstances even if a change of job is entailed.

Employers who are willing to examine each case on an individual basis will reap rewards in terms of loyal long-term employees who have a broad knowledge of their operations.

- Paid Maternity Leave

The Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Pru Goward, recently spearheaded a push to increase maternity leave in the private sector in Australia. As part of this process individuals and organisations have been encouraged to submit feedback on the Interim Options paper "Valuing Parenthood: Paid Maternity Leave". This paper can be downloaded at [http://www.humanrights.gov.au/sex\\_discrimination/pml/index.html](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/sex_discrimination/pml/index.html). Paid maternity leave has been raised with WIMNet by members as a key issue and an area of concern to a number of women working in the industry. The WIMNet feel that working conditions are often a greater deterrent to women returning to work after childbirth, but for certain women paid maternity leave is very important.

Preliminary results from the WIMNet Diversity Questionnaire<sup>ix</sup> showed that of the 20 responses received to date only 6 of the companies currently

offer paid maternity leave. There is a considerable range in leave policies that offer anywhere up to a maximum of 14 weeks paid leave. Although political and community debate over the advantages of paid maternity leave continues, WIMNet recommends that other employers seriously consider the potential benefits of paid maternity leave as a useful strategy to retain skilled employees and to maintain diversity in its workforce, particularly where flexible working conditions are already available.

Paternity and adoption leave is also offered by some industry employers, and this may assist in retaining skilled employees.

- Childcare  
Employer sponsored childcare may help to encourage employees with family responsibilities to return to employment in the industry. Even in the larger mining towns available childcare places may not offer hours suitable to usual shift patterns. Employers can help by checking the locally available childcare and consider working with local childcare providers to ensure childcare places are available which suit employees' needs, at a price they can afford, and where possible close to work locations.

## OTHER ISSUES

- Local advertising of job vacancies  
In many mining towns a major recruitment cost is relocating new employees and their families, and there is an associated cost where an employee leaves because the family does not settle into the new environment. Local recruitment is expected to reduce these costs and to increase workforce stability. In some locations this may increase aboriginal participation in the workforce. Local recruitment should be encouraged, even where this may involve organising additional training for new employees. Initial local advertising (local press, community notice boards) together with internal advertising of vacancies could promote diversity, reduce recruitment and staff turnover costs, and above all provide the industry with a stable workforce.
- Public Perception of the Industry  
Responses from the WIMNet Diversity Survey demonstrate that many employers in the mining and exploration industry are keenly aware of these issues and are implementing strategies to improve diversity in their workforces. People in the wider community are influenced by negative portrayals of the industry in the media and by recollections of past practices. Inevitably, there will be a time lapse between change in the industry and public perception. This is a complex issue which affects not only the pool of applicants to mining and exploration companies but also the pool of applicants to tertiary and TAFE courses related to the industry. Both The AusIMM and employers have a role to play in encouraging people from diverse backgrounds to join the industry. Existing AusIMM initiatives such as the Australian Student Mineral Venture, the Young Leaders Conference, the Youth Congress, etc may help to attract a wider

range of people to the industry and should be more strongly supported by all in the industry. New ideas and initiatives should also be encouraged.

## CONCLUSION

The WIMNet Survey has highlighted some strategies and ideas for improving diversity in the workforce. Employers who aim to be amongst the leaders in their industry will regularly review their diversity strategies and compare themselves with other employers. This should help to attract and retain the best employees and maintain a corporate culture of professionalism. Both The AusIMM and employers have a role to play in encouraging people and students from diverse backgrounds to join the industry. In the long term, the public perception of the culture of the mining industry can also be improved, attracting a greater diversity of people into the industry.

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<sup>i</sup> Sections of this paper have appeared previously in Pattenden, C (2002) "Why Does Diversity Matter?" in *The AusIMM Bulletin*, July 2002.

<sup>ii</sup> Gilbert, J. A. and B. A. Stead (1999). "Stigmatization revisited: Does diversity management make a difference in applicant success?" *Group & Organization Management* **24**(2): 239-256.

<sup>iii</sup> The Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency website, [www.eeo.gov.au](http://www.eeo.gov.au), modified 27/5/02.

<sup>iv</sup> *Report Card: AHRI's Workforce Diversity Management Survey 2001*, A joint project by the Australian Human Resources Institute and the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, January 2002, p. 2

<sup>v</sup> Broad Based Socio-Economic Empowerment Charter for the South African Mining Industry [www.dme.gov.za/minerals/mining\\_charter.htm](http://www.dme.gov.za/minerals/mining_charter.htm)

<sup>vi</sup> Gullett, C. R. (2000). "Reverse discrimination and remedial affirmative action in employment: Dealing with the paradox of nondiscrimination." *Public Personnel Management* **29**(1): 107-118.

<sup>vii</sup> Pattenden, C. 1998 Women in Mining. Rept to the women in mining taskforce, AusIMM.

<sup>viii</sup> Hall, Brigitte (2003) The WIMNet Diversity Questionnaire- summary of responses to date AusIMM Bulletin July/August 2003

<sup>ix</sup> Heiler, K. (2002). The Struggle for Time: A review of extended shifts in the Tasmanian mining industry, ACIRRT, University of Sydney.

Potts, T & Potts, S. 2003 FIFO – Flying into Family Obstacles – A Personal View. AusIMM Bulletin Jan/Feb 2003.

<sup>x</sup> Hall, Brigitte (2003) The WIMNet Diversity Questionnaire- summary of responses to date AusIMM Bulletin July/August 2003