

US Conference highlights common issues for women



In November, Deborah O'Brien and I were lucky to attend the US Women in Transport (WIT) Accelerate Conference in Dallas, Texas. I found it to be an inspiring event and well worth the effort to get there.

The conference attracted more than 400 delegates from across the US road transport industry. Listening to the keynote speakers, participating in the breakout sessions, and chatting with other delegates emphasised that no matter where you go many of the issues women experience are fairly universal.

The underlying theme of the conference was the issue of unconscious bias and how women can counter it. Discussions revolved around how to normalise the role of women in road transport without strengthening the perception that because you are a woman, you have it easy. The fact is that women have never asked for an easy pass but usually have to work harder and longer to be recognised as proficient, especially in management positions.

To level the playing field, we have to make the industry more attractive to women. It was therefore fantastic to hear such a strong endorsement of this purpose from other delegates and speakers at the conference. One breakout group addressed this issue from a recruitment perspective and presented the wide variety of opinions about how recruitment processes should cater for women from

'we should do nothing'. If a woman is the best candidate, then she should get the job. This would actively encouraging woman to apply for specific roles.

A common denominator was that the majority of speakers had experienced some sort of attitudinal bias against them, including being told they were overqualified for certain positions. Surely, having highly qualified and knowledgeable staff should be an advantage for a company regardless of gender.

The conclusion was that businesses need to develop sound questioning and information extraction techniques that are unbiased and use recruitment teams that have experience and include women recruiters.

An idea I put forward to further help women through the recruitment process was the development of an 'employment pack' that includes information on the company and industry relevant to women. I plan to develop this idea further, so watch this space.

A broad variety of other topics were discussed by the many excellent speakers at the conference, including Dr Valerie Young, who introduced the concept of the 'imposter syndrome'.

This is the feeling that we are not as capable or as smart as people think we are. It stops us from performing to our best and has a negative effect on self-esteem. Women seem to be particularly susceptible to it, as it reinforces feelings

that we are not good enough and helps create the glass ceiling mentality used as an excuse for not attaining our goals.

Brian Brockhoff delivered a fascinating session about 'gapology'—a theory that differentiates winning leaders from those who fail to meet expectations. Brian identifies three performance gaps—the knowledge gap, the importance gap, and the action gap. The effectiveness of communication, outlining tasks, and removing personalities from decision-making were acknowledged as important factors of leadership success.

The final session of the week included a discussion about the generational change we have experienced since WWII, the rise of Millennials, and how different generations think.

Internationally, it is accepted that to attract younger people into our industry, we need to promote better work/life balance. A lot of younger people are happier working three to four longer days a week, leaving them free for leisure and family time over a three-day weekend. I don't see why this couldn't work in our industry.

An opposing shift could also work three to four days, meaning you have a seven-day coverage. Forget 70 hours a week and make it 3540 and double or quadruple shift trucks. I acknowledge that this requires a huge change in culture, but perhaps, it is something that globally our industry needs to consider. ■