

Benefiting from wider diversity

More women are entering the oil and gas and petrochemical sectors – but there’s still a way to go. It’s all part of a wider drive to increase diversity in the workforce



Diversity of gender and race within senior management roles leads to better thinking and decisionmaking

CHRISTIE MOFFAT HOUSTON

It is no secret that the energy and chemical sectors have long been industries dominated by men. Even with the advancement of diversity awareness and company programmes to improve gender balance, women still only make up approximately 25% of the downstream and petrochemical workforce, and around 15-16% of the upstream and midstream workforce.

Notably, more than new 1.3m jobs in the industry are forecast to emerge between 2010 and 2030, with many more opportunities arising for women to move into both blue-collar and white-collar roles, including management. However, women remain a minority in the top positions.

Among them is Heidi Alderman, senior

vice president of BASF’s North America petrochemicals division. One of a growing number of female executives in the petrochemical industry, Alderman says that the gender landscape has changed significantly since she first graduated college in the early 1980s.

At the time, Alderman estimates that the ratio of men to women in her field was 10 to one. Now she points to the higher ratio of women graduating from science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines and going on to work in related fields – though she acknowledges that the industry remains male-dominated.

In Alderman’s personal experience, no special programmes existed when she was moving through the ranks, from entry-level engineer to executive, until she arrived at BASF.

Over the years, Alderman heard diversity

discussed, but there were no mentoring programmes, no network of male and female leaders focused on helping women, and no special training programmes to strengthen women’s leadership skills and confidence.

However, Alderman says that personally she never felt that she was disadvantaged by her gender, or that she was treated differently because she was female. “That doesn’t mean I wasn’t, but I never felt it,” she says.

“I’ve never felt uncomfortable in my own skin, whether I’m the only woman or not, but it’s still a very male-dominated industry out there.”

Alderman says there are still times when she is reminded of the gender imbalance in the industry, such as at conferences, where the majority of attendees are still male, and in meetings with other companies, where she may be the only female.

Alderman admits that sometimes she wishes that progress with gender diversity could move a little faster at BASF. However, compared to other companies in the industry that continue to showcase a leadership without many women, she is proud of what has been accomplished.

According to recent statistics from the National Science Foundation (NSF), women remain under-represented in the science and engineering (S&E) workforce – but less so than in the past. Overall, women constituted 50% of the college-educated workforce in 2013, compared to 43% in 1993.

The NSF found that women employed in S&E occupations were concentrated in different occupational categories than men, with relatively high proportions in social sciences and life sciences, and low proportions in engineering, physical sciences, and computer and mathematical sciences.

Data from the NSF also indicated that the S&E workforce is aging, with the median age of scientists and engineers in the labour force sitting at 43 years in 2013, compared to 41 years in 1993.

The US Department of Labor released its own report in 2014, examining women in the labour force. It found that women made up 47% of the total US workforce, but were much less represented in certain science and engineering occupations.

PROACTIVE REQUESTS

For example, 39% of chemists and material scientists were women; 15.6% of chemical engineers; 17.2% of industrial engineers; and only 7.2% of mechanical engineers.

Andy Talkington, managing director of executive recruitment firm ZRG Partners, says that diversity requirements really began to expand in the 1990s, and recruiters now receive proactive requests from clients for a diverse slate of candidates.

“Going back many years ago when we first started getting the call for diversity, it was gender diversity. But now it has morphed to true diversity, which is ethnicity, background, sex, whatever,” explains Talkington.



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HEIDI ALDERMAN

Senior vice president, North America petrochemicals, BASF

“The complexity of diversity has changed, and companies continue to look for ever-increasing diversity in their ranks. That’s been a key request in most of our searches, especially at the executive level.”

In particular, Talkington says that companies have become more “worldly”, and are looking for capable leaders who are familiar with working in a global landscape, and can effectively manage diverse teams of people.

A RANGE OF PATHWAYS

Various initiatives, such as mentoring programmes and associations for women and minorities, are helping to boost diversity within organisations and break through some of the traditional ceilings, he adds.

And women entering the energy and chemical industries are not limited to the traditional technical pathways to the executive level. Talkington says that leadership in the upstream and chemical industries had traditionally been based on technical expertise, such as engineering. However, there are more women entering the industry in functional areas, such as lawyers, accountants, marketers and human resources leaders.

Patricia Rossman, chief diversity officer at BASF, says the push for gender diversity in recruitment across the petrochemical industry is coming from external influences, such as customer needs and the essential drive for innovation. Rossman also emphasises the importance of diversity in problem-solving, as men and women may come up with solutions in different ways.

It is important for companies to harness this combined firepower, Rossman adds. “There’s a customer advantage in that, because we look at things through different lenses, and bring different perspectives. That’s why I think companies around the world are really embracing diversity, for the business advantages that it brings.”

BASF has several employee groups to help network with other co-workers, including a Women in Business group and a Construction Women at Work group. There is also a broad mentoring programme, designed to assist with cross-functional and cross-discipline training.

Similarly, ExxonMobil has local employee networks to support various communities within its business, such as the Women’s Interest Network (WIN) and the People for Respect, Inclusion and Diversity of Employees (PRIDE) group.

Many companies within the industry have publicly stated their commitment to diversity in their recruitment and hiring practices. However, opportunities for employee networking and mentoring still remain hit-or-miss, depending on the size and leadership of the company.

Looking ahead, Alderman believes that more women will emerge in engineering in technical fields. Furthermore, she thinks the industry will see an increase in women entering trade professions, becoming electricians, pipe setters, and so on.

As this currently is an area of the workforce with very few women, Alderman believes that interest will grow in these professions, based on workforce initiatives and attractive salaries.

As plants continue to be built and expanded in the US, there is a growing need for more workers to help build and operate these facilities – and Alderman believes that women will embrace more opportunities to enter the industry in these capacities.

“There’s going to be a war for talent, and if we ignore that the female



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Managing director, ZRG Partners

sector is a key place to get that talent, then we’re missing out,” Alderman notes.

Rossman acknowledges that many segments of the industry continue to face a branding challenge, particularly about the daily nature of jobs in the manufacturing sector, which in the past may have involved more stringent physical requirements.

REACH OUT EARLY IN EDUCATION

It is important to reach out to young women earlier into the education system, to ensure that people from all backgrounds, including women, are interested in moving into the STEM disciplines, Rossman says.

Talkington adds that diversity in the workforce is more visible today than ever. “Companies have become a little more cognizant that the closer their workforce and leadership looks like their customer base, the stronger their organisation is,” Talkington explains.

As an older generation of scientists and engineers begins to retire, Talkington believes that younger candidates, many of whom are women, will take centre stage.

“There are a lot of good leaders out there that are female in this industry, and I think their opportunities are opening up more and more,” Talkington concludes. ■