



Women in Mining

Glass ceiling slowly cracking

By Libby Lyons
Alcoa of Australia
manager of government
relations and public policy

Equality for women in the workplace has come a long way in the past few decades and the figures speak for themselves.

In 1964 only 28 per cent of the workplace in Australia was made up of women compared to 45 per cent today.

This is a big change but many would admit that even in today's competitive jobs market, where unemployment is less than 3 per cent in Western Australia, numerous challenges remain for Australian women at work.

The Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency's most recent (2006) census of women in leadership showed that Australia's corporate boardrooms are still dragging their feet when it comes to gender balance at the top and board diversity.

Of the top 200 ASX-listed companies in Australia, women executive managers make up only 12 per cent, with the number of female board directors just 8.7 per cent.

Of course, there are multiple reasons for these statistics and just as many viewpoints as to why the disparities and anomalies exist.

Equally, it's fair to say women have come a long way overall and, as the figures show, some are reaching the top.

However, career development for women can in many ways be seen as dependent on an employer's willingness to provide opportunities and flexibility.

I believe I am fortunate to work for a company that can demonstrate significant progress in providing many and varied career opportunities for women to meet their potential.



Libby Lyons

Alcoa of Australia is a high-profile national company which has been named an Employer of Choice for Women by the Federal Government's EOWA for the seventh consecutive year.

What's more, we have a managing director who practises what he preaches.

Alan Cransberg, who has worked for Alcoa for 28 years, is a father of four and is very clear in his view that if your child has a special school assembly, you should be there and not at your desk.

With this calibre of leadership, gaining loyalty and commitment from employees, as well as developing a sound platform of mutual respect, is greatly enhanced.

Above all else, however, I believe the essential reason for businesses to embrace women and provide flexibility for working mums is that it simply makes good business sense.

In an increasingly tight labour market, employers offering a level of flexibility have access to a massive talent pool of female staff.

Without doubt, companies that take seriously the issue of work/life balance stand a far greater chance of attracting



the right people who in turn are best placed to assist in delivering bottom line results.

For these reasons, encouraging diversity and providing opportunities for women to realise their career potential have been central strategies for Alcoa.

Today, about 20 per cent of the company's managers are women, a strong rise from 1995 when Alcoa had just six female managers

This has been achieved by developing a culture with a focus on providing employees with the opportunity to succeed professionally, while also being assisted to compartmentalise their work and home life.

Unsurprisingly, Alcoa's flexible work policies are mainly accessed by women. These include paid parental leave, work-from-home arrangements, remote working flexibility, permanent and temporary part-time work and job-sharing arrangements.

In addition, leave policies allow employees to access sick leave when caring for an ill family member.

Alcoa has also increased the amount of paid maternity leave from 12 weeks to 13 weeks and also offers paid paternity leave of one week.

In addition, the organisation offers managers flexible start and finish times to accommodate caring responsibilities.

Significantly, Alcoa's return to work rates following maternity leave remains high at around 90 per cent.

The data suggests that the organisation's ability to offer part-time work for women returning from maternity leave has had a significant impact on retention of women.

And this comes on top of many other initiatives including career development opportunities, scholarships and sponsorships programs as part of the

company's Future Women in Industry program.

This is a dedicated women's network, which has piloted a mentoring program for women and continued external recognition including best Australian Large Employer for Women as voted by EOWA and a past major award win for work and family by the Diversity Council and Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The bottom line is that for many women a fulfilling career means taking up leadership positions.

Smart companies need to focus on ensuring there are no barriers to women taking up these senior roles.

And so I urge women in the workplace to take up the raft of opportunities available and to support and encourage each other.

This is becoming particularly important with different generational expectations in the workplace as baby boomers begin to retire and Generation Y continues to enter the workforce.

Generation Y (birth dates between 1980 and 1994) has an entirely new work ethic and order of motivating factors.

The Gen Ys are ambitious, hardworking, transitional, technically savvy and reward-driven.

What's more, they have very different expectations about what makes a good employer.

Employers are recognising the Gen Ys are uniquely driven and that attracting and retaining them involves higher levels of reward and flexibility, delivered faster than ever before – which is yet another reason for employers to provide flexibility for both their male and female employees in the workplace.

- Libby Lyons was a key speaker at the Making of Me event last month at the University Club of WA. The career development and leadership day was organised specifically for women. ■