

Women in GIS Leadership - Developing a Grassroots Approach



62% of young women do not see themselves staying in the GIS industry for more than ten years, this is related to the fact that at management level women are outnumbered four to one.

A recent study titled "Graduate Pathways for GIS Professionals" by Mairead de Roiste of Victoria

University, Wellington found that nearly two-thirds of female graduates expect to leave the industry within 10 years, noting that greater support is required for these women at the 'grassroots' level. This statistic should shock people in our industry and act as motivation for retaining talented graduates.

A factor related to this has been highlighted by two well-known industry commentators who have analysed the gender imbalance within GIS. Sarah Lewin noted that a recent UK GIS conference comprised of only 33% females, while according to Nathan Heazlewood only 20% of GIS managers in New Zealand are female. Considering these examples, it is critical that we, as an industry, ensure that the gender imbalance at management level is addressed, so that women can see a career progression pathway for themselves.

Inflexible Work

Several interviews with women who face the need to decide between management and family indicate that inflexibility forces females to self-select into alternative positions, such as advisory, specialist or contract jobs, which offer similar seniority to management, but also more flexibility. Although flexible work arrangements are becoming more common, it is, unfortunately, rare to see these arrangements at the management level. Managing a team is demanding, and since employees need to be able to contact their supervisor at any time, working flexible hours can make this difficult. One young mother who was interviewed described how she, upon returning to work, decided to hand over her management position to the person that covered her maternity leave because she could not dedicate enough time to run her team the way she wanted to.

Alternative Positions

As experienced women take up these alternative roles there are unintended side effects for the industry. Less experienced female professionals do not get to work directly with these women and, therefore, the transfer of skills and knowledge to the next generation does not occur naturally. This does not, however, mean that women do not and cannot learn from male managers.

The experience you pick up from your own manager day to day is key to providing building blocks for moving into higher positions yourself. Having a relatable manager means that you can more easily envision yourself in their position. For women, this means that if they see other women leading successful teams while they juggle other commitments at home it will give them confidence in their ability to do the same.

Role Models

Thankfully, the wider geospatial industry does have a number of inspiring women leaders. For example, Laura Dangermond, co-founder of Esri, Corinne Vigreux, co-founder of TomTom, and Barbara Ryan, Director of GEO, have all spent years building up their respective organisations. Laura Dangermond has overseen the growth of a very widespread software system, Corinne Vigreux has led the way for bringing GIS applications into the everyday lives of consumers, and Barbara Ryan has managed the huge task of gathering an immense range of GIS data sources into a comprehensive system.

Female torchbearers such as these women are often seen at conferences, meaning that their visibility provides inspiration to younger attendees who wish to work in a modern workplace. However, this is just the beginning. Conference organisers should look to increase the diversity of speakers on the main stage. In the future, managers need to persuade women who complete interesting projects to submit presentation proposals. After all (and without wanting to over generalise), in my experience, women have a tendency to understate their achievements and, therefore, often need more encouragement to volunteer for speaking events.

While trailblazing women leaders are an inspiration, unfortunately, these role-models are not so accessible in every-day situations. Likewise, women at the top of the industry cannot possibly reach out to and interact with every young female to give them advice. If these women at the grassroots of the industry don't have a female manager they can look to, then they need to source this advice from elsewhere.

Many of the women I interviewed mentioned that their mentors were the key source of encouragement and support. These mentors help craft and edit CVs, they give advice on job opportunities and on juggling work and family commitments, and they provide insights into how the industry operates. While, it may be unreasonable to expect every female junior person to have a female manager, mentorships provide an alternative avenue for women to share their knowledge with future GIS leaders. Unfortunately, however, in the GIS industry, there are few formal mentoring programmes. Graduates must seek out mentors on their own, which can be difficult if they don't have confidence or don't know whom to ask. Conversely, experienced professionals often don't realise how valuable their advice would be to younger professionals. Thankfully, formal mentoring programs do exist, particularly through the likes of the British Association for Geographic Information Early Careers Network, which helps to connect these people.

Enacting Future Change

A year ago, I interviewed for a GIS job. After connecting to the video conference, I was taken aback to see that all three of my interviewers were female. During my six year career so far, encompassing four very different GIS roles, I have never had an interview with an all-female panel. In fact, if there was a female panel member then she was typically the HR representative who had little or no GIS knowledge. This experience, however, compared to my usual experience with all-male panels, highlighted to me the gender imbalance at senior levels. Also, since the interview led to a job offer, it led me to ask some questions. Were, for example, the ideas that I expressed treated any differently by a female panel? Did these ladies better relate to and understand my career interests and motivations? Or was I simply more relaxed in the company of an all-female interview panel?

What You Can Do

While formal policy changes, such as creating flexi-time working arrangements or building a mentoring programme will go a long way, very often smaller, less obvious initiatives can have a long-term impact. Encouraging experienced staff to become a mentor, even in the absence of a formal program, will provide direct benefits to everyone involved. Hiring a diverse team, including being considerate of applicants that have taken time out, will provide employees that have a different perspective when approaching problems. In this regard, it is vital that females in the industry make an effort to speak at conferences where they can demonstrate their successes, offer advice to others, and push for changes to the modern workplace where flexibility becomes the norm.

Everyone in the GIS industry should ensure that younger generations of GIS professionals, male or female, will be enthusiastic, committed, and feel that they have a future career pathway. If we, as an industry, take the steps outlined above and nurture our grassroots then this will become a reality.

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