

Women in Engineering

Dawn Bonfield 1 July 2013

Well, I didn't expect the level of publicity that we received last week as a result of the press release I sent out recommending that the Bank of England put a woman engineer on their five pound note. Our story was featured on Three Counties Radio, the BBC website, the Telegraph Website, The Times Business Diary, and many other websites and twitter feeds as well. This appeal obviously caught the attention of the press and public, and it looks like it paid off with the announcement that Jane Austen will replace Charles Darwin on the next ten pound note. This is only partial success though, as I would like to have replaced one scientist/engineer with another, but you can't win them all.

Today I received the disappointing but wholly unsurprising news that I didn't get the **fellowship grade** I had just applied for. When I say unsurprising, I don't mean that I don't think I deserve it - I certainly do, after 30 years in engineering and education - what I mean is that it is unsurprising that my Professional Engineering Institution can't see that I do. Fellowships are given to men, mostly, who have climbed the ladder from graduation to senior management in predictable steps. When they get to a managerial position they carry out Professional Development Reviews annually and manage the day to day work of their team. This is worthy of fellowship. Women, on the other hand, who do not climb the same ladder, but go on a different journey are deemed not worthy of fellowship because they are unconventional and have done things a different way. The fact that they may be making an impact in engineering, and touching the lives and influencing thousands of girls and women on an annual basis, influencing government policy, and representing the views and needs of women in engineering is not considered worthy of recognition. This is why we have so few women in engineering and even fewer in managerial positions - the system is not set up for unconventional routes, and is why the Women's Engineering Society continues to be so important in today's engineering sector. When Professional Institutions change and see that there is more than one way of doing things, then we will start to get somewhere. Until then, we will continue to campaign for diversity in engineering, and all of the necessary changes to convention that diversity brings with it.

I visited Arup this week at their impressive offices in Fitzroy Street in London. Arup are a company who seem great to work for from the diversity angle. They have an impressive women's network, and also a new and vibrant LGBT community. This seems to be a truly enlightened company when it comes to diversity, and I am sure that this pays off in terms of the job satisfaction and retention of their staff. It would be interesting to see whether this has been measured, and also to see how this level of diversity impacts on the overall success of their business. I feel that the level of diversity in an engineering company is an area that is not well documented, and could be investigated further through case studies and statistics. One thing that was interesting to hear was that the open day they held last year for female undergraduates was not entirely popular with universities, who felt that this was unfair discrimination. Of course it is. Arup are trying to get the best levels of diversity they possibly can, so they need to ensure that from a small talent pool they get more than their fair share of female graduates. If Universities are worried about this they should encourage more women onto their engineering courses so that these preferential days are no longer necessary. One way of doing this would be to have a common first year or first six months to all engineering degree courses so that undergraduates aren't faced with the baffling option of literally hundreds of engineering qualifications, practically none of which they understand. After six months they would then be in better position to choose a course from an informed viewpoint, more likely to stick with their choice through to a career, and more likely to choose engineering in the first place.

And finally, plans are taking shape for next year's **Women in Engineering Day** which will take place a year from now on 23 June 2014. This is a new National celebration which we would like anybody keen to promote engineering to girls or anybody wishing to do more to encourage women in engineering to support. One thing we are planning is a register of women engineers who would be willing to talk at their local school, so if you read this and you would be willing yourself to speak or know of somebody else who would, then please get in touch with me. More of this later. office@wes.org.uk