

Women in Renewable Energy Scotland: What businesses can learn



In 2010 a group of women working in the renewable energy sector came together to create a Scottish network. They were concerned about the skills shortages facing the industry, and the lack of women at all levels across the sector. They sought to provide a forum, delivering local members events through which like-minded women working in, or aspiring to work in, renewables could share information, ideas and experience on overcoming barriers to their success in the workplace, while also addressing the gender imbalance.

In 2013, the founders of WiRES met with Close the Gap, Scotland's specialist partnership initiative on women and work, and it sparked an exciting project that would test the concept of women's networks. Women's networks have become internationally recognised as a way for women to support each other to succeed in workplaces and sectors where they may be in a minority.

Life-fulfilling work is never about the money – when you feel true passion for something, you instinctively find ways to nurture it.

The project

Close the Gap secured a grant from Big Lottery to develop WiRES, and deliver a year's worth of intensive activity. WiRES created a programme of networking events, hearing inspiring renewable energy leaders in the Scottish Parliament, Glasgow Science Centre, and a host of local spaces around Scotland. It held technical skills events at renewable energy sites at Whitelee Windfarm, Gask Farm Biogas Plant, Pelamis Wave Power, and The Hydrogen Office. WiRES brought in mentoring expertise from Women's Enterprise Scotland to create a mentoring programme, which ran from July 2014 until January 2015.



Bringing women together to overcome challenge

The problem that WiRES was developed to challenge was that of women's workplace inequality. We know very little about women's experience of working in the renewable energy sector in Scotland, but the data we do have suggests that around a quarter of the sector's employees are women, and that most of these women work in back office and support roles.

The women who joined WiRES described a set of very familiar challenges. Only 39% said that flexible working was available in their workplace. 25% reported feeling out of the loop because of their gender, and 20% felt that their contributions were not valued as much as their male colleagues'. There were also worrying indications of further potentially unlawful behaviour on the part of some employers. 15% said that they had experienced sexual harassment in the workplace or onsite. 14% reported being paid less than male colleagues for the same work¹.

Despite signals that the renewables industry had not yet completely got to grips with the issue of gender, the women who joined WiRES were attracted to the sector. WiRES set out to make a positive difference to women's sense of what would be possible in their careers, and to help them to develop a plan to realise their goals.

¹Close the Gap (2015) *WiRES evaluation report*



What happened

WiRES focused on two specific outcomes: building women's networks, and building women's career planning and strategising skills. The international evidence suggests that these two factors are critical to women's long-term career success.

Most of WiRES' 553 members did not take part in the mentoring programme, but attended networking events and site visits when they could fit those around work and family commitments. These evaluated successfully: 99% of networking event participants agreed or strongly agreed that WiRES strengthened their professional networks. Across the site visits, 98% agreed or strongly agreed that their professional networks had been strengthened, and 100% agreed or strongly agreed that their knowledge of the renewable energy sector had been enhanced. The fact that the mentoring programme would only be up and running for six months when it was evaluated prompted Close the Gap to avoid outcomes related to progression, promotion, or employment. The in-depth interviews with mentoring participants, of which five were with mentors and four with mentees, revealed some surprisingly positive stories about the immediate impact of the project.

[My mentee] was promoted twice during the programme.

(WiRES mentor)

After the second or third session she got a pay rise and more responsibility.

(WiRES mentor)

In the final survey of mentees, 50% said that they had made significant career changes following the programme.

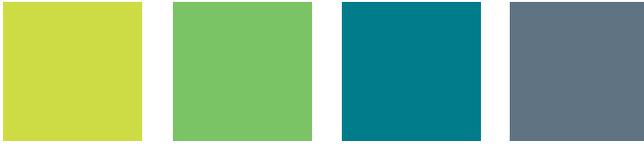


What businesses can learn from WiRES

Creating or supporting women's networks is one way that individual businesses can send a strong signal they support women's ambitions, and that there is a future for talented women in their companies. There are some practical steps to doing this:

- Be positive about external networks and mentoring. Treat taking part in WiRES and similar programmes as a development opportunity for your people.
- Explore the possibility of creating an in-house network or mentoring programme. Close the Gap can provide advice on how to go about this, and can link you with businesses in Scotland who have successfully created their own.
- Join with other leading companies in your industry to create a network. Scottish Women in Technology (SWiT) is a partnership between Cisco, Dell, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Skills Development Scotland, Perceptive Partners Communications, Oracle and Scottish Enterprise.

There is no sector or business in which there is gender balance at all levels. The under-representation of women at senior levels and in male-dominated jobs suggests that many businesses and sectors have not yet managed to achieve their goal of hiring and retaining the best talent. Businesses that take the career roadblocks out of women's paths are more productive, more innovative, and more profitable.



Close the Gap works in Scotland on women's participation in the labour market.

Partners include Scottish Government, Scottish Enterprise, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Skills Development Scotland, Equality and Human Rights Commission, and Scottish Trades Union Congress.

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Published March 2015



Building on the successes of the project to date, WiRES aims to continue to grow and deliver a programme of work under the stewardship of the existing steering group from April 2015.

For more information or to join, go to:
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