

The Blueprint Towards Gender Neutrality in IT



London recently played host to over 3,000 GIS professionals. What made it different from many other IT events was the large proportion of female industry experts in attendance, making it arguably, says Sarah Lewin head of pre-sales and tech research at Esri UK, the most gender-neutral IT event the industry has ever seen.

We have become used to seeing news stories on the lack of women in IT with the general consensus being that on average only 17% of IT workers are female). Yet, at the Esri UK User Conference, it was almost double that. In fact, drilling down further into the list of attendees shows that almost half (45%) of GIS Analysts and just over half (52%) of GIS Technicians were female.

At a Tipping Point

More interesting perhaps is that this trend is expected to continue as the next generation of GIS workers graduate into full time employment. Some 64% of the 98 GIS students in attendance were female; meaning that gender neutrality may even go past equilibrium in the near future.

The reasons behind the trend are open to conjecture. Some point to the fact that, by its very nature, the GIS industry doesn't employ traditional geeky techie people but rather leans towards mathematicians and geographers.

Breaking up the Old Boys' Club

I think what is also making GIS so appealing to both sexes is that the technology is intuitive and can be applied to so many different industries. As such, GIS is an ideal route into the wider technology arena; as a data scientist said about the GIS industry: "it is a way to break into the old boys' club".

When I studied my GIS master's degree at Edinburgh University some 16 years ago, less than a third of students on the course were girls. On beginning my career I found that it was equally male-dominated, though as the User Conference showed, it is far more balanced today. But there is more progress to be made before we see a more gender-neutral senior management line-up in the boardroom, as it is still tilted towards the top. I'm hopeful that the trend we are seeing from graduates will address this balance in the coming years.

Looking to the Future

It is heartening to see so many initiatives now looking to get children as young as five into coding from an early age. Without such a paradigm shift there is an impending skills gap on the horizon, not just in technology but in other industries such as engineering, which won't be filled by men, so the focus needs to widen.

GIS is taking up the reins and providing a blueprint for success. GIS is now on the national curriculum and through the investments, we are making into Esri UK's CSR initiative, GIS technology is now being used in some 140 universities across the UK on a range of courses including architecture, biology and geography. The amount of students being exposed to what can be accomplished with GIS is increasing month by month and is why so many graduates of each gender are coming up through the ranks of education establishments interested in exploring a career in the sector.

Whilst we won't truly break the glass ceiling for some time yet it is encouraging to see that, over the past five years, half of those joining our graduate programme have been female; so the move towards a balance has begun.

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