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Women continue to break ground in the construction industry

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The challenges women face in the construction industry were discussed by a panel of industry leaders at Buildex Calgary.

Members of the Calgary Construction Association Women in Construction Committee made up the panel, while Jill Drader, the founder of Women in Work Boots, moderated the discussion.

Being a female had nothing to do with Jo-Anne Foster's rise in the construction industry, but gender roles were something she was aware of throughout her career, she said.

"It takes a certain type of personality to be in this industry," said Foster, who is a project manager at Bird Construction and chair of the Women in Construction committee.

"I was born with it... I refused to take no for an answer and so the tone was set for my future career."

Her mentors and role models in both her life and career were men.

"First, was my father, who was a water well driller, who worked with the first female journeyman water well driller," she said.

"She got her ticket in 1972. He didn't look at her and tell her she couldn't do it. In his opinion, if she could do the work, she had the job," she said.

This made an impression on Foster as she adopted the stance that ability was a bigger factor than gender for a job.

After 10 years with a condo development company, Foster decided to move over to the general contracting side of things, and found working with the trades more satisfying.

"I got to get my hands dirty, so to speak. I was in my comfort zone," she said.

"And, when someone would say I couldn't do something, I would prove to them I could."

Not everyone on a construction site views a woman as equal, as Foster discovered when she showed up on a site as the project manager.

"I showed up on site and the site supervisor refused to even look at me, let alone have me as his project manager," she said.

"He looked right past me and told my manager that the site was not welcome to women."

A year later, the same supervisor requested that Foster be his project manager again.

She had to prove she could do the job, which was frustrating.

“You just take a deep breath and carry on knowing that you are good at Women are tested when they come into a new jobsite, said engineer Kim Connell, who is the VP of construction strategies at CANA Construction.

“They test you to see if you know what you’re doing, before they take you seriously,” she said.

“Once you’ve overcome that and you prove you know what you’re talking about, they’re supporting and accepting of women in the industry.”

Women on the worksite often face other challenges, some as simple as having a decent Porta-Potty.

“I would strategically find a gas station to use the bathroom before going on site, because I couldn’t stand the Porta-Potty,” Foster said. “And, there was no way I was asking for my own Porta-Potty.”

Moderator Jill Drader agreed.

“I remember being on the commercial side, when I was first pregnant and didn’t want to tell anybody, when I used to pull up to site and get out of my truck, just look at the Porta-Potties on the other side of the fence and get sick, before I even got to work,” she said.

Yet, attitudes in construction are changing.

Foster, Connell and Serena Pockar Holbrook, general manager and CFO for the Pockar Group of Companies, spoke about the men who supported, encouraged, mentored and defended them during their careers.

“I had a great boss, who accepted me, gave me a lot of opportunities and let me expand my job description, and try anything I was interested in,” Connell said.

She later found out that he defended her against complaints from others based on her gender.

Panelists noted that the generation of men entering the industry are looking for work/life balance as much as women.

Finding that balance can a challenge.

Jo-Anne Teed, VP and co-owner of Universal Flooring Systems Ltd., has been working and living with her spouse and company co-owner for more 17 years.

“It takes the same sort of things in any relationship in any business, including flexibility to review and discuss any situation and work on it until you work it out or change direction as needed,” she said.

“Contrary to popular belief, women aren’t always right and eating crow is a painful experience. You need perspective, in seeing a problem and opportunity from both sides, because you need to see that before you move forward.”

Women at the seminar were encouraged to focus on their strengths and become really good at what they do.

“Competence is key. Without it, you will never be able to realize your potential,” said Trish Steele, senior in-house legal counsel at Flynn Canada Ltd.
