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Retaining and Promoting a More Gender-Diverse Workforce in an Engineering Consultancy Through Specific Development Training

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ABSTRACT

In order to increase the retention rates and career advancement of women, Atkins, a multi-national engineering consultancy and member of the SNC-Lavalin Group, has introduced a development course. The course was created by an external training provider, Skills 4, who also deliver the training. Designed to equip women with skills to aid their career progression, since the introduction of the course in 2011, the organisation has seen an increase in the number of women in senior positions, as well as an improvement in retention rates for women. In this article the course curriculum is summarised, and its impact examined. Additionally, the training programme and its results are compared to those of a similar initiative in the United States.

KEYWORDS

Gender diversity; engineering; career development; Atkins; SNC-Lavalin; Skills 4

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INTRODUCTION

Atkins is one of the world's largest design, engineering, and project management consultancies, and has been a member of the SNC-Lavalin Group since 2017. Aware of the looming skills gap and recognising the benefits of a more diverse workforce, the former chairman, Allan Cook, made a commitment in 2010 to increase the number of women at Atkins in the United Kingdom. A Gender Balance Focus Group was created, which identified the need for a development programme for women, supporting women as a minority within both the organisation and the wider UK science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) sector.

A Women's Development Programme focused on building confidence and addressing personal barriers to career progression was launched by Skills 4, a training company specialising in gender diversity, development, and equality programmes (Skills 4, 2018a). Atkins was one of the first organisations to adopt the Women's Development Programme—an approach now widely used across a range of both STEM and non-STEM companies.

Initially, the course was funded through the government's Women and Work Funding initiative and was first launched at Atkins in 2011 (Jayne Little, Managing Director of Skills 4, personal communication, May 2018). However, the benefits to the company proved to be such that, even after government funding came to an end, Atkins continued to offer the course to female employees who had completed the graduate scheme (or equivalent). As of 2019, the course was available to both Atkins and SNC-Lavalin employees in the United Kingdom.

This case study outlines the course content and provides evidence of its success, measured by the increase in the number of women in senior positions and the improvement of retention rates. The course is also compared to a similar initiative in the United States (not used by SNC-Lavalin Group).

COURSE CONTENT

The four-day face-to-face programme is delivered by Skills 4 to SNC-Lavalin and Atkins employees over an eight- to 12-week period, allowing each cohort of between 10 and 16 participants to build a strong network and share incremental successes. Following the training, two hours of one-to-one coaching are available for the women to take up at a time of their choice.

The course was created in 2008 based on research into the personal barriers to career progression encountered by women working in male-dominated professions. Over the subsequent decade, the course has been updated and adapted based on the direct experiences of, and anecdotal evidence gathered from, women attending the course.

The course content includes:

- flexibility in communication style, including gender smart communication;
- unconscious bias and its impact on career progression;
- improved confidence and self-belief (using neuro-linguistic programming techniques);
- increasing organisational visibility focusing on professional brand, effective networks, and presentation skills;
- career analysis, goal-setting, and action planning.

In addition to addressing personal barriers to career progression, participants also contribute to reports on perceived organisational barriers. These reports are then used to inform initiatives to address such barriers.

COURSE IMPACT

Feedback from participants demonstrates the significant impact of the course on individuals, for example Skills 4's case studies of Rachel Cook and Sophie Payne (Skills 4, 2018b, 2018c). The Women's Development Programme has been a catalyst for change at Atkins, with further initiatives started as a result of the Women's Development Programme, such as the creation of a Women's Professional Network and a Women's Leadership Council within the company. As presented below, workforce diversity figures, retention rates, and an increase in the number of women at senior levels indicate the positive effect of these initiatives on the business as a whole. Additional initiatives to support diversity and inclusivity include additional training courses for line managers and senior leadership, addressing unconscious bias and management of diverse teams, as well as a returner's programme for those coming back to work after a career break, for example following parental leave (open to both women and men).

As of April 2018, 28% of employees at Atkins were female; an increase from 24% in 2012. Using the latest data available for seniority and retention from 2016 (2017-2018 data not yet available) and looking across all levels of seniority, from graduates to senior leadership roles, the trends are broadly similar, with the total number of women employed by Atkins increasing by between 27% and 30% in 2016 compared to 2011. Gender pay gap data also show an increase in the proportion of women in the upper-middle quartile between 2017 and 2018 (SNC-Lavalin, 2017, 2018). An increase in retention rate of between 7% and 9% can also be seen at all levels. Furthermore, the number of women leaving the business has decreased year-on-year, resulting in reduced recruitment costs and the retention of valuable skills. Atkins believes that the Women's Development Programme is one of the key factors contributing to these improved figures (SNC-Lavalin, 2017, 2018). For senior staff, the percentage of women has increased from 14% in 2011, to 18% in 2016 (latest promotion data available). More than a third (35%) of participants attending the course between 2015 and 2016 have since been promoted, with over two thirds promoted within a year of attending the Women's Development Programme, indicating that the course has been a positive catalyst for their career development. Participants report increased confidence and improved career focus, and the programme is widely recommended by participants to other women in the

company. Rachel Cook, a Practice Director in the transportation division, describes the Women's Development Programme as "the single most important piece of training I had ever had in my time at the company," and observes that the Women's Development Programme "has made a real difference in the workplace. The number of women putting themselves forward for promotion panels now is incredible. More are opting into the process rather than sitting and waiting to be recognised" (Skills 4, 2018b, p. 1 and p. 2). Sharron Pamplin, HR Director for Atkins in the United Kingdom and Europe, stated: "we know that targeted support, offered at the right time, can make a big difference in retaining our skilled and talented women. Working in partnership with Skills 4 is having visible benefits regardless of our women's stage of career" (Skills 4, 2018a, p. 2).

These effects are not confined to Atkins. Research by Skills 4, which included results from more than 4000 participants, found that by the end of the course, 97% of individuals had a more pro-active approach to career progression, 58% had taken on more responsibility in their existing role, and 18% had taken on a new role entirely (Skills 4, 2018a, p. 1).

An additional benefit of the Women's Development Programme is the natural formation of a supportive network of women. In the majority of cases, the cohort of participants on each course formed an informal network, allowing for continued support. Participants are also encouraged to feed back suggestions to Atkins in order to ensure the organisation's culture remains inclusive to all.

COMPARISON WITH U.S. DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME EXPERIENCE

A similar career development programme exists in the United States. Van Oosten, Buse, and Bilimoria (2017) have analysed the content and impacts of a Leadership Lab for women in the STEM sector in the United States, where women represent 46% of scientists, 25% of whom are in computer and mathematical professions, and 12% of whom are in the engineering professions (information taken from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). The researchers point to previous studies that identified career development obstacles specific to women as including "structural barriers within the educational system; individual and psychological factors; family influences and expectations; and perceptions of the STEM educational and the workplace experiences" (van Oosten et al., 2017, p. 2). Despite these barriers, a range of institutions have been working towards increasing the representation and advancement of women in the engineering and computing professions, for example in educational institutions, government agencies, charities, and corporations. Increased representation within these professions has been recognised as providing "tangible benefits" for organisations, as well as for individual women (van Oosten et al., 2017, p. 2). In addition, the researchers note that in the United States (as in the United Kingdom), women leave professions such as engineering at a far higher rate than men, creating "a brain drain and a persistent challenge for organisations" (van Oosten et al., 2017, p. 2).

Similar to the Skills 4 Women's Development Programme, the Leadership Lab was designed to respond to the specifics of women's experience in technical roles and organisations, and to provide participants with the "knowledge, skills, connections,

and support to succeed and catalyse change in their organisations” (van Oosten et al., 2017, p. 3). Research contributing to the shaping of the course covered:

- why women remain in STEM roles;
- self-awareness and self-efficacy in women’s leadership development;
- emotional intelligence in leadership effectiveness;
- the catalytic power of a personal vision; and
- the positive impact of coaching relationships.

Reporting on the impact of the programme, Van Oosten et al. (2017) state that over a three-year period, over 50 women completed the course. The following four main themes emerged from the “overwhelmingly positive” feedback they provided: (a) job promotions; (b) heightened awareness of unconscious bias and its mitigation; (c) stories of personal transformation around the themes of self-efficacy and breaking counter-productive thinking and behaviour; and (d) benefits received from coaching relationships (van Oosten et al., 2017, p. 4).

As with Atkins’ Skills 4 Women’s Development Programme, past participants have remained in contact with their fellow participants, establishing informal networks through social media. From these networks, the researchers have been able to ascertain that the participants remain in their professions and that approximately 40% of the women had sought and received a promotion (van Oosten et al., 2017, p. 4).

CONCLUSIONS

As part of a wide range of initiatives aimed at enhancing diversity, the focused, women-specific development course run by Skills 4 at Atkins and SNC-Lavalin has had a positive effect, not only on the number of women employed by the company across all seniority levels, but also on retention rates. On a personal level, participants report greater confidence and job satisfaction, and enhanced career progression (Skills 4, 2018a). These results generally reflect those of a similar programme in the United States.

The 2017–2018 annual report of WISE (the campaign for gender balance in STEM) reports that the number of women working in the core STEM sector is increasing at a rate of 8% year-on-year, and it is forecast that the number may rise from 850,000 currently to one million by 2020 (WISE, 2018). There will be a need to develop these women for leadership in the STEM sector. Courses such as the Women’s Development Programme will help to meet this need.

Now in its eighth year, the Women’s Development Programme continues to inspire and equip women with the knowledge and skills required to progress at SNC-Lavalin, Atkins, and currently at 13 other STEM organisations, including engineering, construction, ICT, and universities. It recently won the “Most Inspiring Training Programme” at the Inspire Awards: Diversity in UK Construction, Engineering and Housing 2018 (Skills 4, 2018d).

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