

Saving subsea through diversity



THE SUBMARINE CABLE INDUSTRY, MUCH LIKE TELECOMMUNICATIONS AS A WHOLE, IS REASSESSING THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THIS EVER-CHANGING MARKET. AN AGING WORKFORCE, STALLED INNOVATION AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES ARE FORCING TELCOS TO PAY ATTENTION

The lack of statistics that exist around women in subsea is shocking. For this very feature my search took me to the very depths on the worldwide web, tapping up numerous resources via LinkedIn and email and I still came up with nothing.

Through my own grassroots style of investigating, I scrolled through the websites of the some of the biggest players in subsea to inspect their management pages in hopes of seeing a strong female presence.

Of the six companies I surveyed not one had more than 30% of its management team led by women. The highest of them had five of its leadership positions held by women, out of a possible 18 (27.78%). The lowest had just one. And two had no women on management teams at all. As the industry at large is facing a skills crisis, these are issues that need to be addressed.

A new initiative

This year's second annual Subsea Americas event, which is taking place in Fort Lauderdale, will see the launch of a brand new initiative called Women in Subsea. Led by Naaz Bax, events manager at Seaborn Networks, and Amy Marks, CEO of XSite Modular, the pre-event

session will offer networking opportunities, advice and workshops for women working in the sector.

Commenting on what inspired the initiative, Bax explains: "While the absolute number of women working within the sector is still small, it is growing. We want to provide a platform for these women to come together, mentor and support one another."

"Though I see groups at large promoting things around women in telco in general, I didn't see anything that spoke to women in subsea specifically," adds Marks.

Though the timing of the initiative aligned itself well with Subsea Americas, Marks says it's more the tone of the industry at the moment, that makes this so greatly needed. In her view, the sector is at a crossroads.

"I think some of the big players are recognising that there's an actual skills gap right now. Much of the talent has moved on or retired and it's very homogenous," she explains.

Debbie Brask, vice president of project management at SubCom agrees, saying that the size of the sector will mean the shift toward diversity will happen over time.

"The undersea cable industry is a very

small population and in my opinion, given the longevity of the workforce in this industry, the trend toward diversity will be more gradual," she explains.

Speaking to other prominent women in the sector, the consensus is that subsea is no different from telecoms as a whole.

This has improved over time, but the industry still needs to figure out a way to attract more women, to develop them and to retain them in both commercial and technical roles.

Over at Ciena, Alice Shelton - senior consultant of global submarine sales - says that "diverse workforces are more than just 'the right thing to do', they are a business imperative".

Shelton's sentiment is echoed by XSite Modular's Marks who wants to make it clear that it's not a women versus men issue, it's a business issue that needs to be taken seriously.

"This is not about feminism," she says. "This is not about wanting our place at the table - this is about money, capitalism, competitive advantage and saving this industry."

According to a 2017 report by McKinsey & Company, entitled *Delivering Through Diversity*, it indicates that those organisations with greater gender diversity outperform those that don't by 21%.

"You'd have to live under a rock on the planet to not understand that bringing in diverse viewpoints in leadership, is going to help you grow your business exponentially and become more innovative," continues Marks.

According to Brask, the solution could start by having "industry experts provide an overview to many key engineering universities and review engineering opportunities in the undersea telecoms market". Overall, she says it's about "setting precedents and ensuring representation at all levels".

Bax adds that it would be good if companies would "commit, the way Seaborn and XSite have, to making sure this initiative has traction, then we would be off to a good start".

But it's not all doom and gloom, the industry has come a long way in recent years. Shelton says "it's promising to see that there are more initiatives being established to encourage girls and young women to look at pursuing careers in science and engineering".

Young people

The new initiative is to feature a segment on 'claiming your own path' something, which first sounded akin to a self-help workshop but after speaking to the two co-chairs feels a lot more grounded in women taking responsibility and ownership in their work.

"I think we have to take stock on what we want to accomplish personally and find a path in which to do that. If you're a woman who's been in this industry and has some experience here, this is your time," says Marks.

Both Marks and Bax want attendees of the initiative to walk away with more than just good time but the start of a long-term group that can grow and evolve over time, with real practical benefits.

"We're not just trying to motivate and educate the men and women who want to attend; we really want to make this a resource mining event," Marks says.

For Bax however, it's a little more personal. "I think there is an underlying belief that sometimes women can be hardest on other women," she says.

"We want to see that myth erased within the subsea industry and to make our messaging loud and clear that we are here to support one another."

What is the biggest piece of advice from these leading ladies? Go where your passion is, specialise in it and do it with confidence.

"Find something you are interested in, research it and the companies that work within that area," says Bax.

"Define your speciality," adds Marks. "Become an expert in something no matter how small or niche it is. Take it, claim it and own it as yours."

But don't let this conversation fool you. Though promoting women into more

gap," she says.

What's the solution? Attract more young people into the telecoms space.

"We have to empower them to bring more technology into our business, to bring other thought processes into our business, to be trained and have the tools to help them define their role within this industry," explains Marks.

And Brask agrees, adding: "There needs to be targeted marketing and recruiting to educate new talent on the subsea market and how they can fit in to drive

solutions and new products to keep up with worldwide bandwidth needs".

"These content players are perfect benchmark companies to learn how to attract this younger talent

- most for example have supplier diversity programmes," continues Marks.

"Why are we not looking at some of the biggest OTTs on the market right now and figuring out how to bring some of that into our industry?"

“This is not about feminism, this is not about wanting our place at the table - this is about money and saving this industry”

Amy Marks, CEO, XSite Modular



subsea roles appears to be the answer on all fronts Marks thinks there's a bigger issue at play here.

Capacity

"You can have women and men, and we could all be aging out and the industry is still going to die out because of the skills

Market Overview

Aside from the issues surrounding the work skills gap, the industry as a whole is in transition adjusting not only to the presence of OTTs but ever-increasing data demands, much needed route diversity and aging cables to name a few.

Speaking to these female thought leaders, it is clear that the entire sector is in flux. Perhaps this preoccupation is the reason why these other concerns aren't being properly prioritised?

"The biggest trends in the subsea industry are the bandwidth needs of our customers - either the content providers or key Tier 1 carriers," says Brask.

She believes that the underlying need for bandwidth is the direct result of the growing use of video streaming applications, as well as the industry's push into new technologies such as augmented and virtual reality as well as ultra-high definition, which all require large amounts of bandwidth for live streaming.

"As these technologies move mainstream,

demand for bandwidth will only continue to grow, driven by the needs of individuals making use of this technology," she adds.

Shelton is somewhat different working for a networking solutions provider. Because more cable operators are increasing their bandwidth capacity to leverage more business opportunities and offer more services, she sees a demand for software-driven solution

"We're seeing a lot of demand for software-defined packet-optical technologies, which enable massive scaling, optimisation, analytics and automation through network intelligence," she explains.

"We're also having a lot of conversations about the need to create more adaptive networks, which harness data and automation capabilities to monitor and reroute traffic in the case of potential cable failures. A big part of this involves bringing machine learning and AI into the networking sector."