

Lessons learned from one of New Zealand's most challenging civil engineering projects: rebuilding the earthquake damaged pipes, roads, bridges and retaining walls in the city of Christchurch 2011 - 2016.

Building new opportunities for women

Story: Women in Construction

Theme: People and Culture

A document which describes the establishment of the SCIRT Women in Construction (SWIC) group and its achievements.

This document has been provided as an example of a tool that might be useful for other organisations undertaking complex disaster recovery or infrastructure rebuild programmes.

For more information about this document, visit www.scirtlearninglegacy.org.nz



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Building new opportunities for women

A SCIRT Women in Construction (SWIC) working group was established to raise the visibility of women working in operational roles.



Fashion forward: SWIC member Kimberly de Vries presenting a new range of protective workwear for women in construction.

Being “open to new ways and other perspectives” was integral to SCIRT’s mindsets and values.

Demonstrating that value – to help fill its labour gap of 900 resources – SCIRT’s strategy targeted women workers from early 2012.

The findings of the August 2013 [Building Back Better](#) research from the Ministry for Women proved a catalyst for further action. A survey of 500 under-employed and unemployed Canterbury women found an untapped pool of labour.

Half of the respondents said they would explore rebuild jobs (such as civil construction) but had not done so in the past because they were viewed as “jobs for men”.

Fine art of advocacy

After sharing the findings with the wider SCIRT team, the SCIRT Women in Construction (SWIC) working group was established in August 2013. It aimed to: *“Raise the visibility and enable women working in construction across the SCIRT programme.”*

Its objectives were clear: Challenge bias, provide role models and explore ways the industry could be more welcoming to women.

The self-governing group of women included

representatives from all parts of SCIRT: HR, communications, design engineers, project managers and crew operational team members. All five head civil construction companies were represented, along with professional services organisations. The group met monthly to collaborate on ideas and determine strategy, tactics and actions to achieve the SWIC aims.

Part of the SWIC success was driven by the philosophy of profiling and emphasising the positive, rather than roadblocks. This helped boost membership numbers, awareness and regard and respect industry-wide. The underlying principle of SWIC’s aim was that “you can’t be what you can’t see”, so a “new normal” was created that ensured images of women in civil construction were commonplace. This approach produced outstanding outcomes.

By engaging with industry leaders, SWIC found organisations were invested in, and open to, ideas to make the industry more welcoming to women. However, some organisations were unsure about the best approach. SWIC found that raising awareness about the current experiences of women in the industry was a positive step. For example, industry leaders were unaware that women working at an operational level were issued with men’s clothing because nothing else was available. The simple act of talking about these issues with employers helped to drive and facilitate change.

Taking it further

SWIC developed collaborative relationships with a number of parties working to raise the profile of women in construction. A quarterly meeting was convened by the Ministry for Women, at which organisational representatives shared ideas and initiatives.

The meeting brought together representatives from several organisations, including SWIC, the Canterbury Employers’ Chamber of Commerce, the Ara Institute of

Canterbury (a local tertiary training organisation) and local Rūnanga (governing Māori organisations) amongst others. The combined focus and work of these groups had a powerful impact as illustrated by the results presented in the table below.

MEASURE	THEN		NOW	
	Year	No.	Year	No.
Number of women enrolled in Trades Training (CPIT/Ara)	2011	50	2014	414
Women employed in construction in Christchurch	2009	2,400	2015	8,600
Women in Construction in Christchurch	2009	9.3%	2015	17.8%
Women in trades roles in SCIRT	2013	2%	2015	12%
NZ Construction UN Women's Empowerment Principles Signatories	2013	1	2014	4

High achievers

Key SWIC achievements included:

- Sourcing and launching civil workwear for women.
- Working with the Ministry for Women to produce two resources – [Growing your trades workforce: how to attract women to your jobs](#) and [Getting it done: Utilising women's skills in the workforce: Lessons from the Canterbury rebuild](#).
- Supporting Hays and NAWIC (National Association of Women in Construction) in the start-up of the Women in Construction awards.
- Winning the NAWIC Helen Tippet Award (for empowerment) in 2015.
- Speaking at a conference in Japan about the group's "learnings".
- Linking SWIC members with NAWIC to ensure the civil "voice" was incorporated.
- Increasing the pool of images of women in construction from only one to too many to count.
- Incorporating those images in everyday SCIRT operational publications.
- Three SCIRT-connected organisations signing up to the UN Women's Empowerment Principles.
- The SCIRT HR and peak performance manager

being recruited to join the advisory board of the Women in Infrastructure Network, measuring and reporting on women metrics.

- Realising a doubling of women in crew roles at SCIRT; from 6 per cent of the workforce in 2014 to 12 per cent in 2015.

Lessons learnt:

Raise awareness: SWIC found that organisations were willing to work towards diversity, but didn't know how. Communicating the current situation and experiences of women in the industry helped facilitate change.

Timely approach: At times, group members struggled to bring good ideas and initiatives to life because of the demands of their day jobs. Having agreed industry support for a set number of hours per week or per month could have made SWIC more successful.

Communication matters: It would be difficult to achieve SWIC's success without the support and dedication of a communications person who continually advocated for the group's aims.

Lead from where you are: Leadership at SCIRT didn't only stem from formal positions of power. SWIC members determinedly supported SWIC initiatives, taking lessons learnt and promoting and presenting them to leadership teams within their home organisations.

Harness formal power: SWIC had a champion on the SCIRT board, who took the role of voicing and advocating for SWIC challenges and achievements across the industry at executive level.

Keep it simple: If activities were too aspirational, the group struggled to find time to implement them. The group lost momentum as a result. By setting small, achievable tasks, it engaged and empowered group members.

Refresh regularly: At times, group members became busy with other commitments. SWIC could have shoulder-tapped new members to continually utilise new energy.