

Online mentors

More women are taking advantage of online education and networking programs to assist in career advancement. By Amita Tandukar

Maxine Leeson, left, and Caroline Pidcock: Helping women network in a male-dominated industry

THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY IS LEADING THE WAY IN encouraging the participation of women in the workforce with the launch of a national e-mentoring program. The Constructive Mentoring program will involve 2000 women by the end of next year, drawing on a wide range of occupations from three industry bodies: Master Builders Australia, the Royal Australian Institute of Architects and the National Association

of Women in Construction. Engineers, project managers, government employees, developers and tradespeople are members of NAWIC.

The success of mentoring programs run by the individual organisations led to the formation of the industry plan, which has attracted a \$250,000 federal government grant. The purpose of widening the program is to extend the network of mentors and increase industry contacts available to women, as these are often a prerequisite for career development.

The construction industry is one of the most male-dominated industries in Australia, with women accounting for only 14.6 per cent of the general construction workforce according to Australian Bureau of Statistics figures released last November. The executive director of the Master Builders Association of New South Wales, Brian Seidler, says there are many women members but they are typically involved in a husband-and-wife partnership where the woman provides the critical business services such as occupational health and safety compliance and payroll but they do not get the professional development opportunities. "Despite that they are the backbone of our industry," he says.

Professional women in construction face similar problems to those in the corporate world. Caroline Pidcock, the past NSW president of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, says that while 50 per cent of architecture graduates are women, only 15 per cent of registered architects are women and many are either part-time sole practitioners or play a minor role in small firms because of family commitments. She says the drop-off is most stark at the time of having children. NAWIC NSW committee member Elizabeth Williams says the industry cannot afford to waste any talent given the skills shortage. "You can't offshore design and building the same way as call centre operators," she says.

Jenny Morris from the consultancy Orijen, which is running the Constructive Mentoring program, has set up face-to-face mentoring programs in other male-dominated industries such as law, IT and engineering. She says the drop-off of women in these industries is an Australian problem because the country's culture of long hours forces women to make a rational decision to leave after having children.

Morris says the long-term aim of the program is to get women into decision-making positions so that the management culture will change towards a flexible work hours approach, but in the short term at least, women will have the confidence to ask for flexibility. The second important career development element is providing an alternative industry network. "Usually, while



men are at the pub networking, women are heading home to look after the kids," she says. Morris says tailoring an individual program is easier in an industry program than in a corporate program where women may feel the need to only discuss company opportunities. A self-development issue that recurs in women's mentoring programs is the need to learn that making mistakes is part of learning and that they should apply for jobs outside their skills set.

Constructive Mentoring will be run in regional clusters, a model that women builders found successful, according to MBA's Maxine Leeson. Although the clusters will begin with a face-to-face meeting, mentor pairs are then encouraged to mix physical meetings with email communication. The addition of online forums means that mentors outside the initial pairing could be contacted for specific expert advice.

E-mentoring is growing in popularity, with several new programs being launched in Australia. The Australian Businesswomen's Network, funded and run by *BRW Young Rich* list member Suzi Dafnis, won a grant in 2006 from the federal government to set up an e-mentoring program for businesswomen around Australia. The criteria for participants is that they must already have been in business for six months and the business must represent 75 per cent of their income. The first six-month program started in January with three mentors and 11 proteges. The second round begins in March and the network is aiming to expand to 180 women by the end of the year.

ABN has developed a collaborative system including web seminars, blogs, the ability to share web articles of interest and a feature that allows women to publish and gain feedback on their business plan. "In traditional ABN programs women take six months to develop a business plan – the progress of the collaborative plans is much faster," she says.

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The Australian Film Television and Radio School, in conjunction with the Screen Producers Association of Australia and Film Australia, is this year setting up a mentor-matching website to provide filmmakers and television producers with opportunities to learn more about business strategy and explore career development. The AFTRS Centre for Screen Business manager, Brian Ward, says the film and television industry is a small industry that is spread across Australia and the world so it needs to tap into the widest pool possible. The AFTRS expects members to use a combination of face-to-face meetings, email and internet video-conferencing after the initial matching through a website. "Our audience is very visual and auditory so I think they will use a wide range of mediums," Ward says.

Interest in e-mentoring may be increasing but there is little published research on the subject. The executive officer of the Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers Australia Connect group, Kim Rickard, has been running an e-mentoring service for APESMA self-employed members since 2000. She is combining theory and practice by undertaking a doctorate thesis at Victoria University's e-commerce research unit on the effectiveness of e-mentoring and expects to publish the thesis at the end of 2007. ●

What it is

E-mentoring is where mentors and mentees communicate using the internet. The interactions can be by email or phone and video-conferencing using applications such as Skype. A wider group of mentors and proteges can also be connected by a web forum where a range of topics can be discussed simultaneously.