

Women Audio Video Engineers (WAVE)

Where are the women in the AV industry?

Is there an age limitation in the AV engineering industry?



Project Background

The report, Women in North West Engineering (WEWIN), produced by a research team from the School of Computing, Science & Engineering in December 2006, found that the under representation of women in engineering is multifaceted. Gender stereotyping, organisational structure, management styles, working arrangements, and the absence of equality practices are all contributing factors.

Following on from this research, the researchers wanted to look into specific areas of the engineering industry and found that the smallest number of women engineers belong to the Audio and Video (AV) sectors. Despite being free from the traditional 'heavy machinery' stereotype of engineering, the AV engineering and technology industries remain male dominated. This project has spent the past 12 months examining gender segregation in this industry.

Aims & Objectives

Why this industry? There has been little (if any at all) research looking into the gender aspects of the AV workforce in general. This project seeks to make a research contribution to raising the awareness of the under representation of women engineers in the North West labour market.

The purpose of this research is to:

- To examine, analyse, and evaluate the working practices and organisational culture in the audio video engineering industries.
- To improve the participation (recruitment, retention, and progression) of females in audio video engineering.
- To analyse and co-ordinate the findings from the project.
- To identify practical strategies which may help to influence the effective recruitment and participation of women in this high growth sector.

The AV industry in the North West - an overview

The region has a strong and thriving creative industries sector. The region is the second largest creative economy next to London. It has been estimated that there are over 5000 AV establishments in the North West (ranging in size from those with 1 employee to those with over 100 employees), which employ over 22,000 people. According to Skillset, small units dominate the AV sector: 91% of the workforce are firms with fewer than 5 employees.

There have been several attempts to capitalise on the North West's creative sector as it is considered key in fuelling growth and economic prosperity. The North West Development Agency and North West Vision have invested in this area to boost independent film and television production throughout the region.

Research Methodology

The researchers conducted a literature review to explore persistent occupational segregation which goes beyond obvious sex discrimination. The literature review then informed the next stage of the project - data collation.

Qualitative data was collated through a mix of biographical, semi-structured interviews, and log-books. The team targeted students, engineers, and managers/HR practitioners to take part. The interviews were in-depth to help understand a person's

career trajectory so that the researchers could record details about the individual's career progression, career aspirations, and the journeys they have taken so far.

The researchers used an interview guide to help steer the participants to talk about issues outlined in the literature review, which broadly cover recruitment, work practices, support and promotion mechanisms, equality and diversity practices, training, and education. The team also handed log books to participants which allowed participants to document their day-to-day activities over a period of time.

The log books were organised into 3 sections: personal information, a series of questions regarding why they chose the study/career they did, and finally a diary section where they could record day-to-day occurrences.

Over 350 contacts were approached, but only 25 interviews were conducted. The researchers gave out 16 log books and only 6 log books were returned. The interviews can be broken down as follows: 12 engineers, 4 academics, 4 students, and 5 senior managers. The log books can also be broken down: 3 engineers, and 3 students.

The researchers struggled to speak to a wide variety of participants: the majority of the interviewees fell into the 25 - 35 years old, white, no disability, and no children category. The project team believe that this sample is not representative of the AV workforce as a whole. We recognise the limitations of this work as this project has been unable to delve deeper into this industry and talk to a variety of different engineers.

Project Findings

The researchers found that familiar themes ran across many of the interviews. The majority of the participants reported that a strong interest in music or television prompted them to find out more about a career in the industry:

"Well, I have always been... interested in music, I have played a guitar since I was seven, the flute since I was seven, singing probably earlier than that and then I got a 4-track when I was fourteen..."
Female, Engineer 2

"I used to take radios apart and just do stupid things like build an alarm system for my bedroom or something..."
Male, Engineer 5

Women's association with technology has often been downplayed, but the researchers found that most of the women enjoyed the practical side of this work:

"...you can hire out the equipment and take as much footage and play and practice and get involved and I am really appreciating that at the moment..."
Female, Student 3

"...I would say the females on the course definitely have a greater interest in just the practical side..."
Male, Lecturer 3

"I think especially in the lab females tend to do a bit more than their male colleagues..."
Female, Lecturer 1

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Careers advisors and family can play an important part in helping students decide upon a career path:

"My dad was an engineer... my dad always had a logical approach to things and just having that as an influence might have helped..."

Female, Student 1

Many thought that employers valued work experience and on the job training more than academic qualifications:

"Nine times out of ten they're [academic qualifications] never ever stipulated in the requirements for the job, it would be based on experience. So somebody may have had a degree and another candidate may not... but if their experience is the same then we wouldn't take the one with the degree over that one, it wouldn't be a decided factor."

Female, Manager 3

"...I kind of half think that maybe I shouldn't have gone through University at all, maybe I should have gone off and done something more vocational... its just a huge pressure to go to University and that's how you make money and I think that is complete lies... you can make a lot of money and have a really good job not going to University."

Female, Student 1

The recruitment process is also incredibly difficult as the majority of the industry - certainly the smaller firms - recruit informally:

"I have only ever got jobs through the people I know! I don't think I have ever applied for a job..."

Female, Engineer 2

Others noted how difficult it was to gain work experience in technical roles. It has been reported that hobbies and interests are sometimes thought of as informal work placements for careers in the industry. Virtually all of the engineers who participated in this study acquired skills in this way:

"When I was in college I formed a band with two of my friends... being a girl in a band you just have to get on with it and don't expect people to lift your gear for you and things and you have got to figure out what is wrong with your amp when it breaks because they always do..."

Female, Engineer 1

Working hours and the culture of AV organisations can also provide problems for females working in the industry:

"...if you are a studio engineer...most of them work at night... because the bands that are coming they don't want to work in the daytime..."

Female, Engineer 1

"If you have got a few hours off... I would want to have access to a computer where I could at least do some work... it is very rare that there is a staff room where you can go and sit in... if you wanted to go and have a nap there isn't a crew room..."

Female, Engineer 2

There are a great deal of freelancers working in the industry, and this in itself can have an impact on the working life of an AV engineer:

"...its quite stressful when you don't know if you are going to get paid the next week or the week after. You might not have any money for another month and its just so erratic that its just a weight on your shoulders..."

Male, Engineer 5

"If you're freelance or you're casual... I think you should get the same protection... to do with maternity cover and holiday benefit...'cause otherwise it's just unfair I think."

Female, Engineer 11

Women engineers working in the industry do encounter more problems if they choose to have a career break or a family:

"...you are away from home a lot so I guess if you had a boyfriend or a family or kids or whatever, you would find it really difficult to be away for seven months or whatever... to do it as a career you have to be able to give that family life up to be away..."

Female, Engineer 2

"...the industry dictates the hours, the industry has always been male dominated and it is very unforgiving for anybody who has any kind of family commitments or responsibilities, it's the reason why a lot of relationships fail..."

Female, Engineer 12

Career breaks can also be difficult:

"In terms of career breaks, I think it very much depends on the department you're in, your relationship with them and how progressive and flexible they are, which... varies so much it's hard to say."

Female, Manager 4

Networking can play an important part in the careers of engineers. This can lead to job offers, more freelance/contract work etc and yet women are, for the most part, excluded from these informal practices:

"I think the engineers will socialise over a pint... in the past I think this has put women off to a degree because its, you know, some blokes drinking together and that's not altogether pleasant."

Male, Manager 5

One of the most astonishing things that this project flagged up is that the majority of engineers in this industry are quite young:

"...when you get older you lose your high frequency... you want an engineer with good ears and if you cannot hear what you are mixing then its not a good start..."

Male, Engineer 5

Recommendations

The team noted that currently, there is not nearly enough research being done in this area: they also firmly feel that a great deal more research into this industry is imperative if further progress is to be made. The researchers feel that if further research is conducted, it needs to include a wider cross section of engineers in order to provide representative results.

The findings that are most prominent are as follows:

- Is there an age limitation in the industry? - Due to the technical nature of the work involved, engineers reported that this could not be a lifelong career.
- Recruitment - as 91% of the AV industry are smaller companies, it is likely that they are using informal recruitment practices. This has a big impact on women who may be unintentionally excluded from networking events.
- Freelance/contract workers should receive the same benefits as full time employees, or they should receive unpredictability payments/shift work payments to allow for unforeseen circumstances.

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