

# **Recruiting Women to the Trades: Marketing Strategies that Work!!!**

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## **Abstract**

*Hawaii's Women in Technology Program has demonstrated to local employers and unions how simple marketing strategies greatly enhance the number of qualified female applicants organizations can draw. This paper looks at the ways engineering and construction corporations typically market their job openings and the correspondingly low rate of female applicants who respond. We will then demonstrate increases in female applicants when organizations employ marketing strategies targeted directly to women for non-traditional occupation employment. Finally, we will provide a list of proven techniques to help corporations market construction and engineering jobs and apprenticeship programs to women.*

## **Introduction**

The Maui Economic Development Board's Women in Technology Project (WIT) was launched in 1999 with funding from the U.S. Department of Labor under a workforce development pilot and demonstration grant to encourage more women and girls into science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education and employment. Since its launch, WIT has come to be recognized as a national leader in the field, achieving substantial gains in female employment in STEM careers in Hawaii. In 2001, WIT was awarded a Women in Apprenticeships and Non-Traditional Occupations (WANTO) grant from the U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau. WIT was one of only eleven grantees selected nationwide, and one of only two new grantees, selected that year. As a WANTO grantee, WIT has worked to build upon its success at increasing female participation in the STEM workforce by developing partnerships and offering technical assistance to employers and labor unions to increase female participation in other apprenticeships and non-traditional occupations, including the construction trades and firefighting.

WIT has been able to achieve dramatic increases in the representation of women in STEM employment, apprenticeships and other non-traditional occupations by offering recruitment and retention workshops and technical assistance to employers and labor unions to help them successfully recruit and retain qualified female applicants. WIT has been able to build partnerships with employers because it is administered by a local economic development board that has strong pre-existing relationships with STEM employers and because of strong demand for a skilled workforce that motivates employers to consider new recruitment and retention strategies.

## **Recruitment and Retention Training Workshops**

During its initial assessment phase in 1999, a review of the existing literature on the under representation of girls and women in STEM and an analysis of best practices and model program initiatives was conducted. This review convinced the WIT team of the efficacy of focusing on systemic change by addressing equity issues directly through equity training for employers. Specifically, WIT

learned of a program that had integrated content and gender equity training for teachers and resulted in significant enrollment changes in computer science classes at participating teachers' schools.[1] WIT decided to utilize some elements of the model program to develop a one-day workshop for educators and employers. The workshop was called a Leadership Training Workshop with the subtitle Recruiting and Retaining A Diverse Workforce. WIT hired a consultant from the Washington Research Institute Center for Gender Equity, which had staffed the model program the training was based on, to provide training for the WIT staff and facilitate a workshop in July, 2000. The workshop was initially designed as a full-day workshop, and was attended by 59 educators, employers, students and community members. The workshop was repeated in June, 2001.

The workshop involved several interactive activities intended to get participants to brainstorm solutions to the under-representation of women at their organization. Prior to the workshop, participants were asked to complete "homework" to prepare them for the training. The assignment asked the participants to choose from several research activities, the purpose of which was to expose the participants to the reality of the under-representation of women in STEM. For example, one activity asked them to review popular science or computer magazines and count the number of men and women portrayed therein. The workshop then opened with the participants sharing their discoveries from the homework activity, followed by a brief introduction by the WRI consultant to some statistics and information regarding STEM and the under-representation of women in STEM employment and education. This was followed by a facilitated small group discussion by workshop participants on why women might or might not pursue education or employment in STEM. There was then a role-play activity to illustrate classroom or employment styles that unintentionally discourage females in STEM, and appropriate tools to encourage females in STEM were demonstrated. The workshop concluded with an action planning activity, during which each participant developed an individual plan to address the under-representation of females at his or her organization. The participants then shared the action plan with the group and received feedback from the facilitator.

This workshop format achieved the program goals of increasing awareness among educators and industry members regarding the under-representation of women in STEM, providing them with tools to address this under-representation, and soliciting their commitment to address the problem in their educational and employment environments. In addition, many participants added value to the workshop by further disseminating what they learned at the workshop to their colleagues and associates. The workshop empowered strategic partners in industry and education with the tools to assist WIT in fulfilling its mission to increase the representation of women in STEM education and employment. This helped to create a cadre of leaders in the field statewide whom have helped form the backbone of WIT's program initiatives. The workshops represent the starting point of the process of educating partners in industry and education that takes at least a year, with additional contact and program involvement to reinforce and support the vision, to finally sink in and create systemic change.

When WIT received the WANTO grant, it decided to reinvent its workshop format for use with employers and unions that offer construction apprenticeships in Hawaii. While women are underrepresented in STEM employment, their representation in apprenticeships is even lower. In 2001, women were only 3.2% of all apprentices, and only 2.8% of construction apprentices, in Hawaii. Since WIT's workshops with STEM educators and employers were already showing some success, WIT was optimistic about using the workshops with a different audience. WIT had some experience with the apprenticeship system in Hawaii, since it had developed apprenticeship standards for a Computer Operator (LAN) Apprenticeship, only the second new apprenticeship standards to be introduced in Hawaii in 20 years. WIT had also successfully recruited for the first two apprentices for the Computer

Operator (LAN) Apprenticeship. Using WIT's model recruitment strategies, the top applicants for the apprenticeships were female, which allowed both positions to be filled with female apprentices.

WIT asked the state apprenticeship office and the local office of the federal Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training for lists of employers and labor unions serving on Joint Apprenticeship Committees or sponsoring apprenticeships. WIT then sent workshop invitations to everyone on the lists. WIT made phone calls to invitees to foster partnership and to encourage participation in the workshop. Based on feedback from the seven people who attended the first full-day workshop in December, 2001, the workshop format was shortened to two hours. The 2-hour workshop consisted of a 15 minute welcome followed by a 15 minute group discussion on why women choose the trades and why women avoid the trades. This was followed by a 45 minute presentation on model recruitment and retention strategies. The workshop concluded with 30 minutes for the action planning process, where participants developed an action plan for their organization to implement specific recruitment and retention strategies. During the final 15 minutes of the workshop participants presented their action plans.

Since its first WANTO funded training in December, 2001, WIT has offered six workshops to employers, labor unions, state workforce development workers, and state and federal apprenticeship officers. More than eighty people have participated in workshops under the WANTO grant, representing most trade coordinators and large contractors in the Hawaii construction industry. These workshops provided the basic education in gender equity and recruitment and retention strategies that has served as a foundation for successful partnerships. The workshops were a starting point for WIT's partnerships with employers and labor unions, and the technical assistance, described below, is where the recruitment and retention strategies began to bear fruit and become institutionalized.

### **Recruitment and Retention Strategies**

WIT built upon the training workshops by offering technical assistance to employers and labor unions during their recruitment of applicants. Employers and labor unions had indicated that they had never succeeded at attracting qualified female applicants, and that they surely had never had more than ten percent female applicants. Historically, women entering non-traditional occupations have lacked access to the "old-boys network" through which most positions are filled. WIT knew that the greatest barrier to women entering non-traditional occupations was that women do not have access to the predominantly male informal networks that would make them aware of job opportunities. The main focus of WIT's recruitment strategy was to make sure that qualified female applicants learned of opportunities. WIT conducted a best-practices analysis to look for recruitment and retention strategies designed for the construction and apprenticeship culture. Wider Opportunities for Women in Washington, D.C. was able to provide several valuable resources. WIT relied heavily upon its *Workplace Solutions: The Union Manual* [2], its *Technical Assistance Package for Working With Unions* [3], and its *Training, Placing and Retaining Women in Nontraditional Jobs* [4].

The first labor union WIT assisted with recruitment was the Laborers' International Union of North America-Maui Local. The first way that WIT helped was by developing a flyer with a prominent image of a female construction laborer and the heading "Female Applicants Wanted for Laborer Apprenticeship!" The flyer also gave information about the starting and ending wages for apprentices, benefits, the application process and the dates applications would be accepted. WIT then compiled a fax list of over 200 women-serving organizations, cultural organizations, day care providers, social service providers, health service providers, housing agencies, welfare and unemployment offices, grocery stores, health clubs, Laundromats and beauty salons. WIT developed a cover sheet for the fax that included an image of a female construction worker and explained briefly that women are underrepresented in

apprenticeships, that apprenticeships offer paid on-the-job training with benefits, and that most traditionally male apprenticeship fields offer significantly better pay than traditionally female occupations. The cover sheet asked the recipient to copy, circulate and post the flyer and to notify potentially qualified female applicants. WIT faxed the flyer with cover sheet to the fax list of over 200 organizations, as well as hand-delivered 100 flyers on bright yellow paper to the local workforce development office, public housing office, and welfare-to-work office. WIT also drafted a press release to the local media with the title, "Female Apprenticeship Applicants Sought by Laborers' Union" that resulted in a story the Sunday before recruitment opened. WIT also copied the text of the fax cover sheet and flyer into an email and distributed the email to its distribution list of over 500 people, especially the state and county Commissions on the Status of Women. The time invested in these recruitment efforts was minimal. It took about two hours to compose the fax list, another hour to design the flyer, and an hour to design the fax cover sheet and send out the faxes. It took about an hour to write and submit the press release and another hour to copy and hand-deliver flyers.

WIT also helped with recruitment by helping to bridge the gap between educators and employers. WIT developed partnerships with educators and guidance counselors so that when employers were recruiting, WIT had access to female students and graduates. WIT developed relationships with employers that encouraged them to invest in talented women students through internships and apprenticeships that led to full-time employment. WIT served as a clearinghouse, collecting resumes and developing a communication network of women students, professionals and technical workers that served as a female counterpart of the "old-boys network". By serving educators, employers, and women in the community, WIT was able to create job opportunities where none existed and to learn of job opportunities when they happened and then inform women and those who knew women qualified to fill the opportunity.

Key to WIT's success has been its focus on meeting the needs of employers for a skilled technical workforce. WIT has earned the respect of employers by sending them skilled female applicants that employers feel make valuable additions to their workforce. WIT has served women in STEM by working to educate employers about new ways of retaining and attracting skilled workers, such as developing flexible work schedules and allowing part-time or shared work arrangements. WIT has helped educators develop relationships with employers by encouraging internships and apprenticeships as a value-added arrangement for both students and employers. The WIT experience has been that key to any successful recruitment or retention strategy has been making employers recognize the value and return on investment in seeking out well qualified female workers and creating a work environment that meets the needs of female employees.

## **Results**

The results of the implementation of even basic recruitment strategies were dramatic. Based upon WIT's minimal efforts for the Laborers' International Union of North America-Maui Local, designing and faxing out a flyer with cover sheet and writing a press release, over half of their apprenticeship applicants were women and six women made it through pre-apprenticeship training and were placed into apprenticeships. In all, WIT helped seven employers/labor unions with direct recruitment assistance, resulting in fifteen women placed into apprenticeship and another ten women awaiting placement. Another employer did not receive direct recruitment assistance but participated in WIT's training workshop that described identical recruitment strategies. As a result, this employer placed 55 women into a total of 610 apprenticeship openings, almost 9% women. In all, as a result of WIT's efforts, 70 women were placed into apprenticeships between September, 2001 and December, 2002, and the total

number of women in registered apprenticeships statewide in Hawaii jumped dramatically, from 3.2% in 2001 to 5.1% in 2003, an increase of 59%.

WIT has become a recognized leader in promoting women in STEM fields. As a result, WIT functions as a convener between STEM employers and female job seekers. Employers directly seek WIT's assistance in filling a workforce need, and conversely, job seekers request WIT's assistance in placement. By working directly with employers to fill employment opportunities, other than apprenticeships, in STEM fields, WIT was able to place an additional 23 women into employment. As a result, the representation of women in technical positions at the Maui Research and Technology Park increased by more than 10% in three years, from less than 13% in 1999, to 23% in 2003. Many employers have adopted WIT's mission and proactively collaborate with WIT to diversify their workforce. One employer, so impressed with the woman of color it had hired at WIT's suggestion, asked WIT, "Can you send us another one?" Yet another employer now has a 40% female technical workforce and is an enthusiastic supporter of the WIT mission.

### **Acknowledgment**

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### **References**

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[4] The Nontraditional Employment Training (NET) Project, *Training, Placing, and Retaining Women in Nontraditional Jobs*. Available at [www.work4women.com](http://www.work4women.com).