BREAKING THROUGH:
Stories of women in non-traditional occupations
Acknowledgement

This publication would not have been possible without the participation of the women who generously shared their stories and the support of the following agencies:

- Forests NSW, Department of Industry and Investment
- Government Chief Information Office, Department of Services, Technology and Administration
- NSW Police Force
- NSW Public Works, Department of Services, Technology and Administration
- NSW Rural Fire Service
- RailCorp, Transport NSW
- Roads and Traffic Authority, Transport NSW
Introduction

The world of work has changed dramatically for Australian women. In the 1920s women were relegated to jobs deemed too menial for men. Later, in the 1950s it was argued that women’s pay should be sufficient to cover the cost of make-up required to look good at work.

While women represent close to half of all people employed in NSW, and 60 percent of the NSW public sector workforce, they continue to be underrepresented in non-traditional occupations, including trades, engineering, information and communications technology and many uniformed roles.

The greatest barriers for women in non-traditional occupations, and those considering taking up these occupations, are stereotypes imposed by others. Such perceptions are based on the outdated view that gender has a bearing on a person’s capacity to successfully perform the work of certain jobs.

This publication sets out to demystify a range of non-traditional occupations for women, and by doing so, motivate and inspire more women to break through barriers to occupations that are seen to be traditionally male.

*Breaking Through* attempts to capture some of the wide range of non-traditional roles performed by women in the NSW public sector. From forensic analysis of major crime scenes to planning for roads and bridges across NSW; from train network security to growing harvests from stem cuttings; and from keeping the community safe from bush fires to developing a vision for the State’s ICT infrastructure.

In this publication, 20 inspirational women, at different stages of their careers, share their passion and commitment to their roles and the communities they serve. They also talk about the changes they have observed in the world of work over the last decade.

Their stories illustrate that women in non-traditional occupations, like other occupations, continue to navigate the challenges of having a career while trying to maintain a balance between work and family. They break down the conventions about careers for women and demonstrate that family friendly work practices and supportive workplace cultures are crucial in supporting and enabling women to reach their full potential and advance their careers.

*Breaking Through* will inspire young women just starting to consider their futures to think broadly and boldly about the career paths open to them.
Contents

Melissa Clemens, Applications Portfolio Services Manager, Roads and Traffic Authority, Transport NSW .......................... 4
Magda Edmonds, Acting Duty Security Controller, RailCorp, Transport NSW ................................................................. 5
Jen Phelan, Project Manager, NSW Public Works, Department of Services, Technology and Administration ............................... 6
Nada McDonald, Inspector, Manager, Operational Information Agency, NSW Police Force ......................................................... 7
Kath French, Nursery Manager, Forests NSW, Department of Industry and Investment ......................................................... 8
Ada Nguyen, Civil Engineer, NSW Public Works, Department of Services, Technology and Administration .......................... 9
Donna O’Sullivan, Principal Advisor, Roads and Traffic Authority, Transport NSW .............................................................. 10
Jennifer Raymond, Crime Scene Officer, Forensic Services Group, NSW Police Force ................................................................. 11
Kathy Jones, Regional Manager, Forests NSW, Department of Industry and Investment ........................................................... 12
Leonie Freeth, Project Manager, NSW Public Works, Department of Services, Technology and Administration ..................... 13
Alana Grant, Apprentice Rollingstock Electrician, RailCorp, Transport NSW ................................................................. 14
Margy Andrews, Manager, Strategic Projects, Roads and Traffic Authority, Transport NSW ....................................................... 15
Rashelle Conroy, Senior Sergeant, Zone Manager, Hunter Zone, Forensic Services Group, NSW Police Force ......................... 16
Rebel Talbert, Group Manager, Operational and Mitigation Support Services, NSW Rural Fire Service ..................................... 17
Kirsty McGeachie, Program Coordinator, RailCorp, Transport NSW ......................................................................................... 18
Mettina Pavlakis, Director, Government Chief Information Office, Department of Services, Technology and Administration ... 19
Tamara Campbell, Operations Team Leader, Forests NSW, Department of Industry and Investment ........................................ 20
Jennifer Mak, Project Development Manager, Roads and Traffic Authority, Transport NSW .................................................... 21
Lipola Kusnadi, Water Savings Engineer, NSW Public Works, Department of Services, Technology and Administration .......... 22
Lesley Chen, Project Officer, NSW Public Works, Department of Services, Technology and Administration .......................... 23
To get you on your way .......................................................................................................................................................... 24
Melissa Clemens

Applications Portfolio Services Manager, Information Management and Information Technology Branch, Roads and Traffic Authority
Transport NSW

I manage approximately 160 staff in the Applications Portfolio Services area of the Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA), with responsibility for: DRIVES, the licensing system used in all motor registries; registrations and law enforcement; application development and maintenance of online enterprise and corporate systems; and a quality assurance team.

“I have never worked harder or have been as challenged as I have at the RTA”

During my time with the RTA my role has grown, changed and evolved. Within eight months of being with the RTA I was offered the role of Application Development and Maintenance Manager. After taking time off for the birth of my first child, I returned to work and was offered the position as DRIVES Manager. Within six months of being in that role I took on a second role as the Application Portfolio Services Manager.

The challenge for a woman with children in any occupation is trying to balance work and family. You always feel like you’re either good at one or bad at the other. I have never worked harder or have been as challenged as I have at the RTA.

RTA provides the opportunity for flexible working arrangements which makes my life easier. I’ve also gained new skills that will assist me in furthering my career.

The IT industry in the early years was fairly male dominated. There have been times when I’ve been the only female manager in IT and faced resistance and been ridiculed. I’ve learnt to keep my own personality and am mindful of how I express my opinions. Being in this type of environment has taught me to control my emotions and how to be the manager that I want to be.

I’ve learnt that you have to have confidence within yourself and know when to pick your battles and understand that you can’t win them all.
Magda Edmonds
Acting Duty Security Controller, RailCorp
Transport NSW

I started my career with the Federal Australian Protective Service Unit in 1999, where I worked as one of only three females in the Counter Terrorist First Response Division at Sydney Airport. Shortly after that I graduated as an Explosive Detection Canine Handler specialising in improvised explosive devices, concealed bombs and firearm detection. I had my own sniffer dog Xtra, the best and most compliant partner I’ve ever had!

After serving five years with the Australian Federal Police and being involved in high risk search and rescue and overseas deployments, I decided it was time for a change. After a short stint with NSW Police Force I saw an opportunity as a Senior Transit Officer at RailCorp. They were establishing the Security Division Transit function and I saw the opportunity to take on a new challenge in a new environment. I also liked the transport industry - I’d gone from planes to trains.

I started with RailCorp in 2004 as a Senior Transit Officer working on the NSW Rail Network. Within two months I moved into an acting Team Leader role in charge of the CCTV surveillance unit. Whilst in the role I was successful in bringing high profile criminal charges against offenders responsible for malicious damage to RailCorp’s infrastructure. Following this I was given the opportunity to act in the Operations Inspector role and then as Duty Security Controller which took me out of my operational comfort zone and into a corporate environment which I enjoy.

I love the pressure associated with my job. When an incident happens on the rail network, I enjoy liaising with Transit Officers, NSW Police Force, Train Operations and RailCorp Managers and media to reach an outcome which aligns with RailCorp’s core value of customer service. Ultimately it’s up to me to make sure that there’s an appropriate level of response from either Transit Officers or emergency services and a minimum delay to trains due to security incidents. This is our bread and butter and my team and I work to get the issue resolved as soon as possible to get the trains running again.

I think there are challenges being a female in the workplace in general, not just in non-traditional occupations. Over my career I think I have had great opportunities largely because of my dedication and commitment to my work. I received some great advice very early in my career, to learn to be the ‘grey person’, get on with your work and eventually someone will notice. Once you’ve proven yourself then you’re given a go. Certainly there were times in my career where I have felt overlooked for promotions because I was a young opinionated female. But I have proven myself and the opportunities have come, particularly at RailCorp, where females are not only treated equally but also recognised within the Security Division as being excellent front line Transit Officers with great de-escalation and communication skills.

“I saw the opportunity to take on a new challenge in a new environment”
Jen Phelan
Project Manager, NSW Public Works
Department of Services, Technology and Administration

I graduated with first class honours in a Bachelor of Architecture from the University of Newcastle in 2005. After looking at programs with a range of employers, I was drawn to the NSW Public Works Graduate Program in project management. The prospect of working with projects in construction, not just the design phase, appealed to me as this type of experience is increasingly harder to get in architectural practices. I was also attracted by the prospect of working in an environment where you’re supported on the job, not just ‘thrown in at the deep end’.

Prior to the end of the two year graduate program I gained a position as a Project Manager. Within my first three years with NSW Public Works I became a registered architect as well as a registered project manager.

Whilst working I became interested in doing some volunteer work so I applied for the Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development (AYAD) Program. I was successful and applied for a career break. Whilst on the AYAD program, I worked with a Filipino non-government organisation (Gawad Kalinga) to design and construct villages for the poor. This was a fantastic experience and provided me with great skills for work and life.

After a year away on the AYAD program I returned to my role as Project Manager with NSW Public Works. As a Project Manager, I guide infrastructure projects through the design, tendering and construction process. On a day to day basis this involves engaging with design consultants, client liaison, monitoring the budget, reviewing tenders and responding to issues that arise on site. I am currently managing the design and construction of eight Trade Training Centres for the Department of Education and Training as part of the federally funded state-wide program with an estimated budget of $15 million.

“I really enjoy having autonomy over my own particular projects and seeing them through from inception to completion”

I really enjoy having autonomy over my own particular projects and seeing them through from inception to completion. I also enjoy working in an environment with experienced people with a broad range of knowledge and advice I can draw from. I am constantly learning.

There are some challenges for women in non-traditional occupations. In this industry there is a long established male culture – particularly in regional areas. This manifests itself to varying degrees – from curiosity or uncertainty about how to work with women through to potentially being seen as a threat.

Another challenge is the lack of female mentors in the workplace – this is more pronounced in regional areas. I have benefited from many excellent male mentors but at times I have felt the need for connection with other female project managers to assist with navigating the male dominated workplace and for guidance with career direction. I have participated in an online mentoring program in my workplace which I have found beneficial.

The focus always seems to be on women adapting or learning how to work with men, perhaps it’s time we also looked at how men can work more effectively with women.
Nada McDonald

Inspector, Manager, Operational Information Agency
NSW Police Force

I’m an Inspector of Police and Manager within the Operational Information Agency for NSW Police Force. I have been a sworn officer for 30 years and commenced my policing career at Bankstown Police Station, where I was the first uniformed female officer. I have performed a variety of duties including general duties, intelligence, internal affairs and management responsibilities.

My areas of responsibility in my current role include the Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) Unit and the Warrant Unit. The AVO Unit provides critical information on all apprehended violence orders for NSW Police Force and provides advice to operational police on the management of AVOs. The Warrant Unit has the corporate responsibility of maintaining and providing accurate and timely information concerning arrest warrants issued by NSW Courts and other law enforcement agencies for execution by operational police.

Policing encompasses a diversity of roles and functions and I have been able to develop both professionally and personally, by working in a variety of policing environments such as; intelligence, investigations, systems, policy and procedures and project work. I enjoy being actively involved and seeking advice from the range of experience of the police and staff within my team. I had little experience in systems administration prior to commencing at my current command however the professional relationships I developed enabled me to gain valuable knowledge about how operational police deal with all types of warrants and the barriers they encounter. This ultimately enabled me to contribute to the state and national warrant agenda.

I have always been greatly influenced by good leadership within the NSW Police Force and recognised the capacity I had to influence others by using a trust and honesty model to achieve team and corporate goals. This came to the fore when I was asked by the Commissioner to participate in a project to reduce the number of NSW Police outstanding arrest warrants. In a short period of time, I needed to influence the warrant team to engage with me to move in a new direction. This allowed me to use my individual leadership style to influence a variety of staff both sworn and unsworn to undertake new business and a change in focus towards providing stronger operational support to Police in the field.

Women are still significantly underrepresented at senior or management level in policing, although the overall representation has improved over the past few years. Currently, women constitute a total of 34.4% with 26.4% being sworn officers. Through the Spokeswomen’s Network (of which I was recently elected) key priorities are to ensure that views of women are represented, considered and used to influence change and determine organisational priorities and ensure that the organisation continually embraces career development opportunities for women through corporate commitment and implementation of fortified strategies.

“I… commenced my policing career at Bankstown Police Station, where I was the first uniformed female officer”
Kath French
Nursery Manager, Grafton Production Nursery, Forests NSW Department of Industry and Investment

I was attracted to working in nurseries because I like plants, the bush and working outdoors. In 1985 I joined the Muswellbrook Forest Nursery as an Apprentice Nurseryperson, a position established under the Technical Jobs for Women program. I had already been studying Horticulture at TAFE in Newcastle which helped me greatly as an apprentice.

After completing my apprenticeship I applied for the Nursery Manager’s position and was successful. I worked as the Manager at Muswellbrook Nursery for 5 years before moving on to Grafton in 1998 as the Nursery Manager. Over the past 12 years at Grafton I have completed a Diploma of Horticulture, Certificate IV Frontline Management, Certificate IV in Training and Assessment and have been teaching horticulture part time at the local community college.

Workplace safety is important to me and I’ve tried to set a good example for staff by actively participating on committees and involving them in all aspects of safe work principles.

I plan and organise work schedules for our permanent and casual staff who are involved in production scheduling and dispatch. Production scheduling involves many processes, including sowing, tubing, setting cuttings and ordering materials. It also involves researching best practice in nursery production, new innovations and technology, pest

and disease management and nursery crop nutrition and plant health to ensure that orders are ready on time and of high quality. The dispatch process involves teams grading and sorting plants, netting seedlings where required, organising trucks and loading times, checking seedling quality and team outputs. In addition my role involves administering the financial side of the nursery as well as managing the team and liaising with customers and suppliers.

There are always challenges in every occupation and ways to get around them whether it is managing staff issues, pest, disease or plant health issues, hail storms, irrigation failures, lack of infrastructure and equipment, having the materials or time to get the job done. You have just got to come up with another plan if things are not working out.

I think for women entering non-traditional occupations you must be passionate about what you do and be prepared for challenges. Be flexible and get on with all people.

Forests NSW have a male dominated workforce. I don’t really find this a challenge. I’ve just adapted to sometimes being the only female in the group.

“I was attracted to working in nurseries because I like plants, the bush and working outdoors”
Ada Nguyen

Civil Engineer, NSW Public Works
Department of Services, Technology and Administration

When I came to Australia English was my second language. When I was in high school I was naturally drawn to Maths based subjects, which were easier for me to get a grasp on.

I didn’t know what engineering was until I was in Year 11. When the time came to choose subjects for the higher school certificate, I selected largely maths based subjects. I didn’t really have an idea of what career options I had with my selection so I went to my Physics teacher for advice. She went through a range of options with me, including accountancy and mathematics. I knew these weren’t for me. Finally, she recommended engineering. We looked at the different types of engineering and what they involved. She mentioned civil engineering and that it could involve designing roads or constructing bridges. I knew immediately that it was the one for me.

During my studies in civil engineering at the University of Sydney I took on a three-month on-site placement with an engineering company in Newcastle. I was living in South Western Sydney which meant a four hour commute each day. I accepted this as I was keen to get on-site work experience. While I enjoyed the work experience, there were some challenges. I was working with tradespeople who were unaccustomed to working with an undergraduate female. I was responsible for quality assurance checks on site, which meant I was required to inspect their work. This was difficult for them to take. My other challenge was working with diverse groups of people, who were accustomed to speaking in their own jargon. Despite these challenges I learnt a lot on the job. The experience taught me to be confident, recognise that you need to prove what you know, and not to take things personally.

After graduating from University I joined the same organisation in a graduate role. While the challenges on site remained, I was determined to give the job a shot. However, after trying to balance the job and my family, friends and partner in Sydney, I decided that it just wasn’t for me.

While working with NSW Public Works as a contractor I noticed the great employment conditions, such as flexible working conditions and relative job security. I enjoyed working with the organisation and decided that I wanted a permanent job there. I joined the Government Architect’s Office in NSW Public Works in a graduate role and became involved in water auditing and improving investigations around water usage. This gave me the opportunity to use my mathematical and problem solving skills.

I have found NSW Public Works to be very supportive of women. As a mother of a young child I’ve benefited from the flexible work practices available in the public sector. As a mother of a young child I’ve benefited from the flexible work practices available in the public sector. I now have the flexibility to work from home when I need to and to start later or finish earlier to accommodate family commitments while working in the field of my choice.

“As a mother of a young child I’ve benefited from the flexible work practices available in the public sector”
Donna O’Sullivan
Principal Advisor, Workforce Analysis, Human Resource Strategy, Roads and Traffic Authority, Transport NSW

While I’ve worked in a number of roles during my career the majority have been with private sector organisations, such as, Deloitte Consulting, IBM and PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). I started my career in payroll administration and then moved into recruitment. While I was in recruitment I started to delve into payroll systems and how they interfaced with other systems. From there I moved into software development and implementation for PwC. I enjoyed being able to develop software to support business operations and train and develop teams. At PwC, I had the opportunity to learn about project management methodology. I was also involved in HR, recruitment and payroll software implementations for clients such as Sydney University, Austar and Country Energy. As part of these roles I travelled extensively. After starting a family I felt it was time to find a role in Sydney that didn’t involve roaming so I could better balance work and family life.

I was a bit apprehensive about joining the Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA). However, since starting here I’ve found it to be dynamic and extremely challenging. The knowledge sharing that takes place is amazing. Every day I am surrounded by people who want to share brilliance. There is a great sense of collaboration amongst teams in the RTA and the Directors here are very supportive of the role of HR in deploying the organisation’s workforce strategy.

My role with the RTA has evolved since my initial engagement as a Project Manager, Information and Intranet. As the Principal Advisor, Workforce Analysis, I manage the Workforce Information team in the HR Strategy group for the RTA, where I support a more collaborative approach between the business and the HR Partners across the RTA.

Generally, women aren’t traditionally seen in technical roles. However, in this role I’m responsible for managing a team of technical experts as well as having expertise in new data software tools and programs. There are certainly some challenges with the need to keep up with changes in technology, managing a team and having a family.

I think that one of the challenges for women in non-traditional occupations, and for women looking to move into senior positions, is having the time, confidence and skill to apply for jobs - and having the access to them. There are also real challenges for women to work flexibly and manage a career. Managing flexible working options is dependent on an agreement between your manager and business requirements. The public sector would benefit from leveraging the technology that is readily available to enhance the ability of staff to manage work and life more effectively.

“….since starting here I’ve found it to be dynamic and extremely challenging”
Jennifer Raymond
Crime Scene Officer, Forensic Services Group
NSW Police Force

I joined the NSW Police Force Forensic Services Group in 2002 after graduating with a Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Forensic Science from the University of Technology. My first role with NSW Police Force was as a civilian Scenes of Crime Officer, where I examined crime scenes, including burglaries and stolen cars, in the Liverpool and Redfern Local Area Commands. While this was a great introduction to crime scene work I wanted to challenge myself by moving into areas of work involving more serious crimes.

In 2004, I joined the newly formed Forensic Armed Robbery Unit where I facilitated the SICAR footwear database from 2006 to 2007. In 2007, I became a member of the Specialist Location and Recovery Unit (SLR), which assists in complex major crime scenes by detecting latent marks, such as fingerprints and footwear marks.

Since 2007, I have assisted with over 60 homicides and I am now a qualified footwear mark examiner.

As a crime scene officer in the SLR I attend major crime scenes (predominantly murder scenes) to examine the area for marks, such as fingerprints, shoe marks and blood marks using a wide range of optical and chemical techniques. I also collect evidence from the scene and examine these items in the laboratory, where I can use a broader range of methods. A large component of our exhibit examinations have come from cold case homicides.

There’s nothing more rewarding, or provides greater job satisfaction, than locating a piece of evidence that is instrumental in bringing an offender to justice, particularly in a homicide investigation. Nothing beats that ‘eureka’ moment when you’ve spent hours in painstaking and back-breaking examinations and a fingerprint is developed or DNA identified. Crime scene investigation can be extremely tedious and arduous. You may be required to work under extremely difficult situations - such as, having to wear full suits and masks for days in 40 plus degree heat in summer - or go for many examinations without a positive result. But when you do get one, it makes up for every drop of sweat!

The other part of the job I love is that you have to think outside the box every day. Every job is different and you have to think creatively to solve a problem, such as the best approach to examine a scene, and how to remove a door to preserve shoe mark evidence, or how to photograph a particularly difficult fingerprint.

There are some challenges. I am required to be on call for a week at a time, every three or four weeks, to any location around NSW. This is both a benefit and a challenge, in that the job is never routine and I’ve got to see a lot of areas around the state. However, it can be difficult to manage a balanced home life under these conditions, and I imagine it would be extremely hard to do this work with family commitments but believe the NSW Police Force actually manages this better than a lot of organisations.
Kathy Jones
Regional Manager, Central Region, Forests NSW
Department of Industry and Investment

I always wanted to do a science degree. I also wanted to work and live in regional NSW. I was drawn to do a degree which involved fieldwork and that wasn’t just office based. I enrolled at the Australian National University to complete a Bachelor of Science Forestry. At the time the career guide book said that this was degree was ‘not suitable for women’. This only made me more interested to do it. After some work experience with the Forestry Commission at Pennant Hills, Dungog and Walcha, I was hooked. Forestry was for me!

I’ve held a number of roles over the course of my career. I’ve been a Harvesting and Operations Forester, Acting District Forester, Operations Forester, Regional Planning Forester, Marketing Manager Wauchope, Timber Merchandising Manager Wauchope, Acting Regional Manager Mid North Coast and Regional Manager Central Region. In addition I have completed an Executive Master of Business Administration at the University of Technology, Sydney.

As Regional Manager I’m responsible for managing the central region of Forests NSW which covers over 400,000 hectares of state forest, from Gosford to Kempsey, Armidale and Tamworth. I supervise managers who are responsible for forest operations, harvesting, sales, recreation, tourism and planning.

On average I spend one day a week in the field, two days travelling and attending meetings and two days in the office. My work is to make the key decisions for the running of the region, to ensure customer requirements are met, to maintain a high standard of environmental performance in our operations, to ensure the region meets its commercial obligations and to ensure the safety of all staff, contractors and forest users.

“I really enjoy my work. The people who work in this industry love and respect the forest and are great to work with. I get paid to ‘go bush’. Beat that!”

I really enjoy my work. The people who work in this industry love and respect the forest and are great to work with. I get paid to ‘go bush’. Beat that! The timber products produced from our forests are fantastic. I have some of them in my home. The work is always different and there is nothing repetitive about it.

There have been a ‘few’ challenges throughout my career. Being female, being pregnant, being a single mum, the ‘wooden ceiling’, and only having few other female foresters to talk to. I was very persistent and continue to be. My attitude is that I can do, will do, and have done.

In my view the biggest challenge for women in non-traditional occupations is getting to the top. Entering these professions is much easier now than it has been in the past – but there are still very few women in senior roles in non-traditional occupations.
Leonie Freeth
Project Manager, NSW Public Works
Department of Services, Technology and Administration

I suppose I naturally fell into engineering. I was a freak at maths in high school! I don’t really know how it happened; it just came out of the blue. I chose to study civil engineering because it was broad area and there were a range of things I could do, such as, geotechnical, structural or project management.

As a Project Manager I’ve worked on a huge range of projects, including the construction of hospitals. I’m now currently working on the River Red Gum Flood Enhancement Works. My role is to manage the project end to end, in four streams, which includes: the project documentation and specifications; communications about the project; environmental assessment; and the procurement process.

“I love my role as I’m able to develop things from scratch”

I saw a graduate engineer role advertised with NSW Public Works after I finished my studies at the University of Sydney. Within a week of applying I found out that I was pregnant. After a few weeks I received a call from NSW Public Works and was offered the position. I told them they shouldn’t offer it to me because I was pregnant. It was the mid 90s and I didn’t really understand equal employment opportunity. I spoke to a lady from the human resources area and she told me that it didn’t matter, and that I had the job. I was thrilled!

I started in the Water and Environmental Solutions area and was involved in planning the front end of water and supply for small country towns. This role gave me a really good grounding in report writing, something that hadn’t previously been an area of focus in my studies.

Over the course of my time with NSW Public Works I have benefited from the flexibility afforded to me. I had a year off after I had my first child and then came back three days a week and then increased it to four days a week. This helped me to balance my work and family commitments.

I moved to Bathurst to work on the Fish River Scheme. This move suited me as my family is also based in Bathurst.

There will always be someone who has a pre-conceived view of the capability of women. I was at a meeting recently and we had an external contractor present. Based on how he treated me to begin with he obviously thought I was the administration assistant. Once the meeting progressed it became pretty clear to him what my role was.

As I’ve progressed throughout my career these types of things don’t really bother me. I’ve got the runs on the board now and can demonstrate my knowledge and experience.
Alana Grant
Apprentice Rollingstock Electrician, Maintenance Depot, RailCorp
Transport NSW

When I was in high school I always knew that I wanted to do a job that was physical. I wanted to do something that got me out and about, where I could do something different using my hands. I looked at all of the trades and considered what would be best for a female. I had been exposed to trades when I was growing up as my grandfather was a plumber and my uncle was a panel beater. Our family was made up of blue collar workers. In the end I chose to become an electrician.

I saw an apprentice electrician role advertised with RailCorp. The application process was fairly robust; there were aptitude, mathematical and analytical tests. I managed to get through all of the testing and was offered the apprentice position.

I’m now in my fourth year of an apprenticeship to become an electrician. I’m involved in completing the electrical maintenance on trains that come into the depot in the Rollingstock division. The Rollingstock division is responsible for general maintenance. We ensure that the trains are able to run on the tracks. I suppose the best way to describe the type of work I do is to compare it to servicing a car. We deal with preventative maintenance. When I finish my apprenticeship this year I’ll move into other areas of the division which are responsible for running repairs and locating faults on trains.

I really enjoy the variety and ‘getting my hands dirty’. I’m working with guys who have been with the organisation for 40 years and there are still things that come up that they’ve never seen before.

I also enjoy being able to work with other trades such as fitters. I’m learning from other people all the time.

As for women entering non-traditional occupations, I think the hard work was done before me. I was brought up by a family that taught me to have a thick skin, in a way I’ve been toughened up by my family so that’s helped me in my career. The other challenge is the need to prove your worth. I have to remind the older generations that I am able to do the work, and stop them when they say; ‘Oh don’t lift that I’ll do it for you’.

The barrier for women entering non-traditional occupations is partly about the culture and perception that people have about trades. If you were brought up with people in trades around you, then you might consider it. People have a pre-conception that all trades are occupied by men with muscles and grunt behind them, this often turns women off.

One thing I’ve learnt is that women have to work smarter. For example I can’t always use my strength to fix a problem, if I’m using a shifter to do something, I’ll get one with a longer handle rather than use my strength to get the job done.

“One thing I’ve learnt is that women have to work smarter... I can’t always use my strength to fix a problem”
Margy Andrews
Manager, Strategic Projects, Strategic Network Planning, Roads and Traffic Authority
Transport NSW

What attracted me to engineering?
At first I thought engineering was just about designing buildings. In year 12, I went to the architecture school at a university career day where the lecturer said “hands up if you are studying maths, physics and chemistry”. I was one of the students who put their hands up; to my surprise the lecturer said “you should be in the engineering class”. That was my initiation into engineering.

Most students enrolled in my civil engineering course knew someone who did engineering, like their father or their uncle. While my parents had encouraged me to study, they didn’t understand the education system or the options available to me. I have no regrets about becoming an engineer.

I’ve worked on site and in several policy and strategic roles. I worked with the Department of Transport, Energy and Infrastructure in South Australia for 17 years, with my last role being Regional Manager for the Eastern region. I was the first, and remain, the only female to have held that position. During my 20 year career I have changed jobs roles every two to three years to broaden my experience.

Three years ago I moved to Sydney for my husband’s work and was approached to join the Roads and Traffic Authority. I took up the opportunity.

In May this year I moved to the Strategic Network Planning Branch as Project Manager to work on strategic freight projects. In this role I manage the development of a strategy to extend the length of state roads where higher mass vehicles may operate in rural NSW. It’s my role to understand where the bridge restrictions are, what’s required to rectify them and develop project work priorities in line with heavy freight needs.

“women can manage having a family and a career... It’s not always easy but it’s rewarding!”

While being a woman in a male dominated field has generally not been an issue for me, there are times where I have faced challenges. As the construction engineer for several road projects fourteen years ago and the only woman on site, there were basic issues, like having to use the men’s toilets on site and the lunch rooms being plastered wall to wall with posters of naked women. There were men, who reported to me but had difficulty accepting decisions I had made. I was being tested frequently on my knowledge and also at times was inappropriately spoken to. When I became pregnant, some of the older men questioned whether I should be allowed to work on construction sites. My work as a construction engineer was a colourful experience! Although I haven’t been working on site for years I’d like to think that times have changed since my experiences in the 1990’s.

I think part of encouraging women to enter non-traditional occupations is promoting the fact that women can manage having a family and a career. I have tried to balance the two throughout my career and for me I feel that I have achieved the right balance for different stages in my life. It’s not always easy but it’s rewarding!
Rashelle Conroy
Senior Sergeant, Zone Manager, Hunter Zone, Forensic Services Group
NSW Police Force

I’m the Zone Manager for the Hunter Zone as part of the Forensic Services Group. The Hunter Zone incorporates the Gosford, Newcastle and Taree Crime Scene Sections. My current duties include the management of all forensic services within the Hunter Zone. This includes managing human resources, financial expenditure, training and development and overall responsibility for all forensic related activities within the area. The Hunter Zone consists of three laboratories located at Gosford, Newcastle and Taree. Duties performed by both sworn and unsworn staff include; processing scenes of crime for forensic evidence, exhibit analysis, evidence interpretation and identification of fingerprints. Scene attendance varies from volume crime scenes such as break and enters to homicides. My role can include scene attendance at the more serious or complex incidents, technically reviewing case work and overseeing the mentoring and training of new staff.

I still thoroughly enjoy field work and providing technical expertise to investigations that have resulted in identification of an offender and successful prosecution. 

“I still thoroughly enjoy field work and providing technical expertise to investigations that have resulted in identification of an offender and successful prosecution.”

I have faced both operational, education and emotional challenges since taking up the role of a Forensic Investigator. I was required to complete a Diploma of Forensic Science, whilst also completing a Bachelor of Policing. These educational challenges were difficult when trying to balance the operational requirements of the position. Forensic Investigators are required to work on call and provide 24 hour response. This was challenging back in my earlier years as an investigator as recall to duty during the early hours of the morning was common place. After several years doing on call duties there certainly was a challenge with balancing work and family life with two young children at home. Thankfully, flexible rostering with extended shifts has been introduced, part time working options, shiftwork and an increase in staffing levels have all assisted Forensic Investigator’s balance their work and family commitments far more easily over the last few years.

The main challenge for women entering non-traditional occupations at the moment is balancing work and family commitments. Certainly NSW Police Force has been focusing on this issue and have introduced a number of policies and flexible work practices that have assisted women in the workplace.
Rebel Talbert
Group Manager, Operational and Mitigation Support Services
NSW Rural Fire Service

After I finished school I wasn’t certain about what I wanted from my career. My parents suggested I enrol in a business college and enter the workforce prior to studying at university. On completion of my business college study, I joined the operations division of Proctor & Gamble (P&G) as a Logistics Coordinator. At P&G I was promoted into a number of complex and challenging roles that including overseeing international freight during the 1998 water-front dispute and representing P&G Australasia at global summits. After four years I came to a point in my career where I wanted to progress further and I knew I needed a degree to do this. I had also come to a point where it was important that my work was meaningful and personally rewarding. I enrolled in Public Communication at the University of Technology, Sydney.

I was, and still am, a volunteer fire fighter with the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS). Following the Canberra bush fires I decided to take on an internship in the RFS Media Unit. When I finished my degree, I was offered a Media Officer position and became a spokesperson for the RFS during many major fires across the State. After five years I was promoted to Media Manager and was responsible for coordinating media communications on behalf of the RFS and managing public information across the State during fires. During this time I developed a new system for public information and following the Victorian bush fires, I oversaw development of a targeted state-wide advertising campaign and tripled the capacity of the State 1800 Bush Fire Information Line.

In 2010 I was seconded to Victoria for six months to assist the Victorian Emergency Services Commissioner during the Royal Commission. I also chaired the National Bush Fire Taskforce Communications Working Group to streamline public information during bush fires.

“I work hard to demonstrate that women can be successful in this industry”

There are some challenges being a female in a traditionally male dominated industry. I find that the greatest challenge is dealing with people’s perceptions that women in the industry are generally interested in non-operational roles. It is difficult to attract women to specialised operational roles in the industry as these positions require fire fighting experience which some women believe is not physically suited to them.

I work hard to demonstrate that women can be successful in this industry. By mentoring young women and encouraging them to consider specialised training and new challenges in fire fighting and emergency management; the barriers continue to be broken down.
Kirsty McGeachie

Program Coordinator, Worksite Protection Program, RailCorp
Transport NSW

As the Program Coordinator for the Worksite Protection Program, established to drive improvements in safety for maintenance crews working on rail tracks, I coordinate 23 projects and produce progress reports that are distributed throughout the organisation.

I had enjoyed science based subjects in high school and wanted to do something that was practical, so I opted to study engineering. I was also exposed to engineering at a young age, coming from a family of engineers. My dad is a chemical engineer, as is my sister. My brother is also an engineer specialising in mining.

After completing my studies in civil engineering at the University of Sydney I travelled for two years. On my return I joined RailCorp as a Project Engineer, working with rural crews on track work. This was initially daunting as I didn’t have any previous rail experience. However, despite this I found that most people were helpful. I was in a position where I was telling people what to do. I think people accepted that a woman could do the job and were happy to pass on their knowledge. My lesson from the experience is that you have to respect people’s experience and that you can’t be arrogant about the way you operate. One of the benefits of being a female on site was that once I gained the respect of the guys on site it was a relatively easy work environment for me. I can’t say that it was the same for the young male engineers! After a few years I moved into maintenance and focused on asset management. This involved planning future work and scheduling and prioritising asset management over the longer term.

After having my kids I returned to work part-time, which restricted the types of roles I’ve been able to do. I’m not available every day and certain roles require this. I’ve made the choice to enjoy being a working mother and have accepted that there are some roles that I just can’t do.

The challenge for women in any occupation, not just those in non-traditional roles, is to get the balance right. There is no right formula for everyone. It depends on the individual and their circumstance. With RailCorp I’ve had a lot of opportunities to do a lot of things and my managers have always been extremely supportive of me.

One of the benefits of working with RailCorp has been the opportunity to work with a number of different people with different areas of expertise. I also enjoy being able to have my input into changes that are happening in the organisation. It’s great when you are successful in implementing a new initiative.

“I... enjoy being able to have my input into changes that are happening in the organisation. It’s great when you are successful in implementing a new initiative”

I think for women there is a lack of understanding about what engineering is. Some people see engineers as people with hard hats with boots working in the dirt. It’s not for everyone. I think the engineering industry has changed and is more pro-active in promoting engineering as a real career option for women.
Mettina Pavlakis
Director, Government Chief Information Office (GCIO)
Department of Services, Technology and Administration

When I finished high school I wanted to do the shortest university course possible. The shortest course I could find was pharmacy, it ran for three years, so I enrolled.

To my surprise I really enjoyed university and decided to complete a post graduate diploma in Hospital Pharmacy. I started my career working in hospitals. I became the Director of Pharmacy at St Vincent’s Private Hospital. It was the first pharmacy in a private hospital and I was responsible for setting up everything – from putting the shelves up, getting medication charts together and putting together the specifications for the pharmacy computer system for the hospital. There were systems at the time but none that met the requirements of a private hospital. I went on to work on the specification of the first hospital clinical management system. It was a thoroughly enjoyable and valuable experience. However, I was still relatively young and essentially I was already at the top of the tree in pharmacy.

I completed a Master of Business Administration while working as Director of Pharmacy. With my MBA, I realised there was more to life than Pharmacy. I moved into a product marketing role with a health care supplier where I managed supply contracts with NSW Health. A major achievement was the launch of a new concept in surgical masks in Australia, designed to protect the wearer from splatter.

My next move was into a strategic health planning role and along the way became involved in IT in health. This guided my subsequent roles with organisations such as Oracle, CSC, EDS and Unisys covering applications, consulting and project management for government departments in Australia and overseas.

I’ve had a multi-faceted and relatively unplanned career - I’ve been head hunted for roles and each time I’ve said “Of course I can do that”. Throughout my career I had travelled extensively – in Australia and internationally. However, I reached a point where I needed a change. I saw the opportunity to pull together my corporate experience in vendor management, sales, project management and consulting and bring that to the public sector.

As Director of the Government Chief Information Office (GCIO) I enjoy having a team of people, mentoring them and seeing them grow professionally into future leaders. I also enjoy being on the GCIO Executive team and contributing to the future ICT vision for the NSW.

Generally, the challenge for women entering non-traditional occupations is a fear of failure. My approach has always been to work hard to promote myself and my skills and to always think “I can do this!” What’s the worst that can happen? If it doesn’t work out you move back to what you were doing before or on to something else.

When I was in high school, what I’m doing now wasn’t even considered an occupation. Things move fast and we don’t know what jobs will exist in the future - particularly in the IT landscape. So, if an opportunity arises then “give it a go – you don’t know where you’ll end up”.

“When I was in high school, what I’m doing now wasn’t even considered an occupation”
Tamara Campbell
Operations Team Leader, Forests NSW
Department of Industry and Investment

I have loved being in the bush since spending time in State forests as a little girl with my family. When it came to choosing a career, I looked for something that brought together my love of nature and a need for a little bit of adventure in my everyday life. I wasn’t born for this job but I love a challenge. With the support of great people around me I have thrived in this role.

My first job was harvest planning in Coffs Harbour. But in order to experience different landscapes and ways of working I also took up roles in Bathurst, Baradine, and Wauchope. I’ve developed a love of fire, soil and water management, where the outcomes are often immediate.

As Operations Team Leader for Wauchope Forests, which covers approximately 150,000 hectares of State forest on the mid north coast of NSW, I manage a crew of permanent and contract staff and heavy plant equipment to provide a road network for log haulage from State forests. I work daily with our crews to make sure that our roads can safely carry the loads they need, with minimal impact to the environment. I also plan and manage the reduction of bushfire hazard in our forests, which is mostly done in spring and autumn, with planning undertaken all year round.

I am an active firefighter and spend most of the bushfire season either in fire control or putting out active bushfires. I find this work immensely rewarding as it gives me the time to work with different people. At the end of the day you go home knowing that you have made a difference.

Each day is different and offers new challenges to work on, both personally and professionally. I feel a great sense of achievement when I’ve succeeded in doing something I’ve never done before or thought I could do.

I find it deeply challenging when people older, or more experienced, than me question my decisions. On reflection, I can see that these challenges also help me in my role. Taking the time to reflect on the work I have done and trying not to just emulate others who have occupied my role before me helps me to overcome much of my insecurity.

I believe women face three main challenges when they enter non-traditional occupations. Firstly, being able to envisage themselves in the occupation; secondly setting long term career goals and having role models in senior management; and finally having an effective support network around them. It takes a lot of fortitude to get up every day and go to work in a role where you are regularly challenged. In non traditional roles your support network will often comprise men. Ensuring they are open and happy to support women is important. In some ways a structured mentoring program can be helpful for both women and men to understand the role of the support network.

“I looked for something that brought together my love of nature and a need for a little bit of adventure”
Jennifer Mak

Project Development Manager, Roads and Traffic Authority
Transport NSW

Upon graduation from the University of NSW with a Bachelor of Environmental Engineering in 2000, I was at the crossroad of my first career choice. I was offered the opportunity to join the Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA) graduate program and without hesitation I took up the offer. The main attraction was the prospect of visiting the different regional areas of New South Wales during the three year program. From this experience, I was challenged with the many facets of road related engineering work such as undertaking traffic modelling analysis, noise and water monitoring, project design plans review, and involvement in road safety projects. Over this time I travelled to places such as Wollongong, Newcastle, Wagga Wagga, Parkes, Bega and the North Coast. It was in the second year of the program I decided to further my knowledge in road engineering and completed a Master of Traffic and Transport Engineering delivered by Monash University. For me, the highlight of the graduate program was meeting amazing people throughout the organisation. Through observing the different management styles and working with colleagues of various disciplines and skills, I learnt that interpersonal skills are as important as technical engineering skills.

My current role as the Project Development Manager involves the planning of road and bridge projects. This includes organising concept design, environmental impact assessments, community consultation, traffic impact studies, strategic cost estimates and feasibility studies. The job requires an ability to multi-task and be objective in decision-making. Working in a government organisation like the RTA can be fun, challenging and dynamic.

“For me engineering is an art of learning and is about not being afraid to challenge the norm”

When deciding what career path to take, I think it is important to follow one’s heart and to pursue it to the best of one’s ability. I think entering non-traditional occupations for women such as engineering requires great passion and confidence. For me engineering is an art of learning and is about not being afraid to challenge the norm.
Lipola Kusnadi
Water Savings Engineer, NSW Public Works
Department of Services, Technology and Administration

I’ve always been good at maths and physics and I excelled at these subjects at school, so chemical engineering was a natural fit. Of all the engineering specialisations, chemical engineering attracts the most females so I was naturally more comfortable with choosing this career path.

I was fortunate to gain a university co-op scholarship with James Hardie and National Starch and Chemical, where my first role was as a Research and Development Chemist. I also worked as a Water Engineer with Sinclair Knight Merz (SKM) for about one and a half years.

I was successful in gaining a position with the NSW Public Works graduate program, where I have benefited from mentoring, training and development opportunities. I particularly value the opportunity to learn the ‘soft’ as well as hard technical skills. I believe that these are both important for a successful career.

As a water savings engineer I help clients identify ways to improve water efficiency and propose ideas to facilitate a change in behaviour and practice. I know this sounds clichéd, but I feel like I’m making a difference. My view about sustainability and the environment has really changed.

I enjoy being able to interact with clients, learn about their needs and gain a better understanding of their business model so that I can address their needs more effectively. One of the highlights of my career has been getting involved in an odour management study with SKM. It’s not something that a lot of women would normally get involved in. It was a great experience as I learnt a lot about programming and sewer discharge.

There are still some traditional views about how work should be done or structured in the workplace. In some of the former organisations I’ve worked with, some meetings would be scheduled after five, which is not very family friendly. I don’t think this was intentional. Perhaps if there were more women with family commitments in these workplaces their work practices would evolve. In my current workplace I know there is a greater awareness of a work and life balance and meeting times are generally not scheduled after 4pm.

I think being a woman in a non-traditional occupation can be an advantage. The ability to empathise and connect with people is just as important as the technical skills. I’m not saying that men can’t or don’t empathise and connect with clients; I just think it’s more natural for women.

There are challenges in every occupation, even in female dominated occupations. I think engineering is now an accepted occupation for women, and the view that it’s non-traditional is more about perception than reality.

“I know this sounds clichéd, but I feel like I’m making a difference. My view about sustainability and the environment has really changed”
Lesley Chen
Project Officer, NSW Public Works
Department of Services, Technology and Administration

After completing my Higher School Certificate I enrolled at Sydney University to complete a Bachelor of Civil Engineering degree. I was attracted to engineering because I wanted to do something practical and ‘hands on’. Engineering offered the opportunity to work both in an office and in the field on a wide range of interesting projects.

After I graduated I applied for a role advertised with NSW Public Works. The position initially appealed to me because it promoted career development and the opportunity to work on some major projects. I thought I would enjoy the challenge and it would be very interesting.

I have been with NSW Public Works for five years and I am now a Project Officer in the Project Management Group. During the five years with the department I have worked on a diverse range of projects including the state-wide Trade Training Centre Program, the remediation of contaminated sites, and the design of boat-ramp and wharves for the harbour. I enjoy the role because it’s challenging, offers variety and gives me the opportunity to use my creativity.

One of the highlights of my career so far has been the Warragamba Dam Pipe Strengthening Project. This project was a part of the much larger Warragamba Deep Storage Recovery project to secure Sydney’s water during periods of drought. My role was to manage the pipe strengthening component, which was to ensure the operation of the Warragamba to Prospect mains didn’t collapse from a drop in pressure. This opportunity offered me a chance to be a part of a large team and work alongside some very experienced project managers. I truly enjoyed the experience and definitely learnt a lot.

I don’t think there is a major barrier for women entering non-traditional occupations, but it is more challenging for women to progress and be promoted within these occupations. It would be great to see more female role models in senior positions.

I think the challenge for women within non-traditional occupations is to get noticed and be promoted within their field. There have been instances on site when some people would automatically assume the female as someone junior or in administration. By remaining professional and confident, most people soon realise that you are knowledgeable and capable of doing the job.

“I enjoy the role because it’s challenging, offers variety and gives me the opportunity to use my creativity”
To get you on your way...

www.jobs.nsw.gov.au
The gateway to all vacant positions in the NSW public sector

www.eeo.nsw.gov.au
Find out more about the programs the NSW public sector offer women building their careers

www.jobguide.deewr.gov.au
The Job Guide 2011 website includes hundreds of occupational profiles, and is available in three versions

www.myfuture.edu.au
Find current career information, articles and links to thousands of resources to assist you on your career journey

www.year12whatnext.gov.au
Plan your post school education and learning, learn about future work opportunities and find out where to get more help

www.graduatecareers.com.au
Graduate Careers Australia (GCA) is the leading authority on graduate employment issues in Australia

www.gooduniguide.com.au
The Good Uni Guide is a comprehensive and independent information source about tertiary education pathways and career options in Australia

www.tafensw.edu.au
Find out more about the wide range of study options available to you at TAFE NSW
This page is intentionally blank
Disclaimer
While every effort has been made to ensure that the document is correct at the time of printing, the State of NSW, its agents and employees, disclaim any and all liability to any person in respect of anything or the consequences of anything done or omitted to be done in reliance or upon the whole or any part if this document.

Copyright notice
You may copy, distribute, display, download and otherwise freely deal with this work for any purpose, provided that you attribute the Department as the owner. However, you must obtain permission if you wish to
• charge others for access to the work (other than at cost)
• include the work in advertising or a product for sale
• modify the work or
• publish the work to a website.

To obtain such permission, please contact the Department of Premier and Cabinet, GPO Box 5341, Sydney, NSW, 2000.

© State of New South Wales through the Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2011.

Breaking Through: Stories of women in non-traditional occupations

Enquiries regarding this document can be directed to:
Public Sector Workforce
Department of Premier and Cabinet
Telephone: (02) 9228 4444