

INTREPID PATHWAYS—VANESSA SQUIRES

PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND

Formal Qualifications

Bachelor of Science (Honours). Post Grad Dip.

Current professional role & responsibilities

I work as a Geological Database Administrator. I provide geological work flow processes and management of the geological data within the company's corporate technical team.

Employer – type

Medium sized diversified minerals company.

Overview of career in the industry

I have been in the industry for 13 years. I began as a sampler in a pit in Qld for a very short time after graduating till I found work as an exploration geologist in Charters Towers. I left there to become part of geology feasibility team for Cadia Mines in Orange. I left there and worked in Fiji at Emperor Gold Mines. I then contracted myself out to Mt Isa Mines at George Fisher feasibility project for a year or so, then moved to WA. In WA I worked as a project geologist and then a mine geologist for Straits Resources. I then left Straits to become a database administrator. I then left mining to join the IT industry but rejoined mining again and joined Straits again as a DBA.

EXPERIENCES WORKING IN THE RESOURCES SECTOR

Was working in the resources industry what you expected it would be when you were studying/training?

Not really. In some ways yes, in a lot of ways no.

If at any time you left the industry and came back, why did you leave, how long were you gone for and what motivated you to return?

I left at one point as felt that I had had enough of fly in, fly out and did not want to be working in the scorching sun as I got older. I was gone for 4 years. The money and the appealing frankness of the people in the industry drew me back however.

What is the single most risky step you have ever taken your career? Did you find it paid off? Is there anything you would have done differently?

Leaving my career as a geologist and becoming an IT professional for a few years was quite

risky. Not only was I leaving the “community” of peers, but also decreasing my pay packet and climbing the IT career ladder without an IT degree. It certainly did pay off, as I learnt so much about IT that I would not have learnt in mining as mining company IT departments traditionally are kept quite separate. The only thing I may have done differently is completed some database management studies while I was in IT, and perhaps steered my career a bit more (but at that stage I was not sure I was going to return to mining).

What would you say have been the most significant 'step changes' in your career pathway?

Going from an exploration and mining geo to a data management role was a big step, then from that role to an IT based geology role.

Have you ever been in a supervisory or senior management position? If so, what are the pros and cons of being in such a role?

Pros are that as a woman some men seem to drop the bravado and listen better. Cons are that other people find it confronting to have a woman managing them. Some women also find it difficult to deal with a fellow woman rather than dealing with a man.

If you undertook any additional formal study whilst in the industry, did you find it useful in progressing your career?

Yes, I almost completed a MSc but it was not going to progress my career. I realised that the study I was taking was not in exactly the direction I wanted to go.

What have you found most rewarding about the industry and what would you most like to get out of your career in resources in the future?

The most rewarding thing about mining is the travel, the new experiences of working in new places and meeting new people. The industry draws in people who don't beat around the bush and people who say things as they are, which I feel is a lot less confusing than too much pandering to sensibilities or the use of too much business “speak”. There are also many seminars and courses on anything from uranium mining to three-day conferences based on mining software packages where people can network and learn more.

WORKING LIFESTYLE

What are your current work/accommodation arrangements?

Capital city based (with limited travel)

Do you have a preference for any particular working arrangement? What have your experiences with different types of arrangements been like?

My preference is to be capital city based with extensive travel. However having two small children extensive travel is not possible. My experience with regional communities has been good...when it has been for a limited time. FIFO was brilliant as the cooked meals and cleaners

cleaning the room left time to train for triathlons, study and meet with friends after work. Then being faced with an extended break was great.

I think that FIFO can be a trap when lifestyle choices become reliant on the money, and people can forget they can progress their career and leave FIFO, thus becoming dependent on FIFO. Capital based work is very good but maintaining the professional link with the company's mine sites can be difficult to maintain, as being present can get some tasks done a lot quicker than trying to do them remotely from a city.

What changes or compromises have you had to make in order to balance family or other responsibilities or interests with a career in the industry?

My company is very, very flexible on work hours so that I can drop off and pick up my child at school. The downside of this however is that I always miss out on Friday afternoon drinks, and on some meetings. To be present is to be included, and sometimes part time work can leave one on the periphery.

Some plans I have cannot be completed without a larger amount of time spent on them, so it gets down to having to have greater organisation skills to maintain the consistent flow when involved in a project of work.

Has your employer been open to negotiating changes to your role or roster to accommodate non-work interests or responsibilities?

Yes. I think a company would be lax in not tapping into this source of employee as there are a lot of good people who can work and are keen to work, but just not full-time. For a company to ignore this group greatly diminishes their recruitment choices and excludes a large market of good employees.

BEING FEMALE IN THE INDUSTRY

What challenges have you experienced by virtue of working in an industry that is predominantly male? Do you feel you have had to adapt to 'fit' the industry?

This is a very big question. Challenges have been having men torn between chivalry and equality, between noisy male gusto and manners, and showing off and normal behaviour. And that goes from 'fieldies' through to the board members. I have most certainly have had to learnt to adapt. I have never worn any shorts on site, and have always worn running tops under King Gee shirts to cover skin from wandering eyes when I bend down over core, etc. This then became a norm and learning to wear a skirt and "female" clothing has taken years, literally. I have also developed a "no shit taken" exterior, which has worried a few friends not in the industry as they have not understood how to interpret this affectation. The positive side has been the caring side displayed from time to time by male colleagues. Sometimes being less feminine can be tiring and when a break is needed; some men have recognised this and stepped in to help on numerous occasions, from when I found it hard to get my point across, to having been a victim of harassment.

Having spent time in the IT industry I found myself having to adapt to a whole different work culture. On some occasions I would tell a joke or make a rejoinder and the crowd would go silent leaving me wondering what on earth I said! After a few of these incidents I decided the mining industry was the place for me!

The positive aspects are being able to talk “blokey” with tradesmen, being able to wield a drill at home with comfort and (in my mind a positive thing) not resorting to the female guise when working my way out of situations. I have also learnt a lot about safety which I unconsciously use in everyday life. A colleague’s daughter recently lost her school friend when at a camp the friend was run over when sleeping in the line of a 4WD tyre. Someone drove over her in early hours of the morning. Working around heavy machinery, which is often a predominantly male environment, you are taught to anticipate accidents before they occur.

Do you feel that you faced any obstacles or discrimination by virtue of your gender in your career and if so, how did you address these issues in order to continue to progress?

Yes. Some men simply cannot see past the fact that people are people. These men are very uncomfortable in the presence of a female. My opinion is that at work people are to be valued for their skills; who cares if they are black, white, male, female, gay, straight. This should not matter. To address this issue I have employed a little psychology to work around the issue so my presence is less confronting.

Some things such as carrying core trays, driving 4WD vehicles out of bogs and drinking with “the boys” has surprised some men when they see that a woman can be a colleague in mining work and a female at the same time. I figure on not relying on men to help but being part of what they are doing (to a certain degree!).

Funnily enough I recently found some women to be discriminatory. Being 40 I am in the age bracket between where things were a lot harder and now, where people are a bit more sensitive and cautious of treating employees in the “wrong” manner. These women, when asked advice, are of the opinion that women should be louder, more aggressive, less sensitive and “bash” their way through a problem, “sucking it up” if possible. This I have not addressed as I am still surprised.

Also, I have had very inappropriate things said to me over the years. Not so much now, however I have been slapped on the backside twice in the last 4 months! This was met with definite disapproval, stopping what was happening at the time to make the point clear that there was nothing humorous in the gesture.