

Women in Fibre

Committee and FTTH Announce Survey Results

By The FTTH Council Europe



Roshene McCool,
Women in Fibre
Committee of the FTTH
Council Europe

hosted by Roshene McCool, Senior Market and Technology Development Manager at Corning Optical Fiber and Cable, on December 15 last year. Broadband Journal caught up with her to discuss the findings.

McCool explained that across the industry the survey garnered 280 responses and the initial mix looked to be 50/50 between men and women aged between 25 and 56, though upon closer inspection it did appear as though more women than men were motivated to complete the survey.

That is revealing in itself. It was encouraging to learn that most respondents felt they would recommend a career in the fibre industry, she explained, and they can be themselves at work. They also felt that career progression was open to all and most respondents worked in organisations that already

boasted diversity and inclusion initiatives, and should they have the need to report issues related to gender, there were mechanisms available for them to do so. Interestingly they also felt the flexible working practices introduced during the pandemic had improved their working lives.

So far so good. Employees evidently feel supported in a variety of ways and that cannot be underestimated.

However, female responders felt much more strongly that gender was a barrier to progression, and by the responses it would appear that the more senior the category the fewer women there are; they are described as 'missing in action' by FTTH Council Europe, and clearly attrition amongst women at a certain level is an issue that needs addressing.

Gender is a barrier to progression, the female responders felt, while male responders generally don't see any such barriers. Despite the working practices introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, one in three women did not think they have the flexibility of a work life balance. Despite the above positive response concerning escalating issues internally, it appears one in three respondents don't know how to report issues related to gender, even those working in companies with Diversity and Inclusion initiatives. Where there are no initiatives in place, the number rises to two in three responders. That's 2/3 of the female responders feeling they have nowhere to turn to if they experience problems in the workplace.

If there were three things that could change that, and ensure women remain in the industry, what would they be? McCool replied, “The Women in Fiber Committee delivered 10 Recommendations as a result of our gender diversity survey. Therefore, I’d say:

1. Measure and track gender balance in training, leadership roles and leadership development pipelines – to adjust for any unconscious bias at work within organisations and to provide opportunities for staff to progress in an equitable manner.
2. Train staff on the use of diversity policies for issue reporting – to avoid unnecessary attrition of female staff as a result of a potentially hostile working environment.
3. Introduce or expand flexible working policies – to allow staff to maintain a work/life balance and reduce attrition rates of women in early or mid-career.”

Unconscious bias has become something of a buzz-word in recent years, and the results of the survey seemed to suggest this does exist to a certain extent in all of us. Clearly, attracting people at a young age before those biases are fully embedded is worth considering.

In the last 18 months it has come to our attention at Broadband that the very visibility of the telecoms, cable and fibre industries is poor amongst school leavers, leading to a skills gap and something of a training crisis as the fibre roll out nationwide continues. We have covered this in other articles; clearly work is needed to raise the profile of our sector amongst the next generation.

“There is no doubt that encouraging a pipeline of entrants into the industry is important to establish a pool of talent for the future,” McCool agreed. “Outreach activities achieve that and

they must come early, before students make decisions about their subjects of study. Maths and Science remain critical keystone qualifications for a technical career path.

“I’d like to maintain an equal focus, however on the women that are already in the industry,” she went on. “Once women are in the pipeline are we doing enough to ensure that pipeline is not leaking as a result of reduced opportunities to progress or challenging work environments, based upon gender?”

It has to be a two-pronged approach, that is certain. Mentoring is always worthwhile – it is rare to come across a mentor or a mentee who felt the exercise to be a waste of time, but it is laborious to set up, and the results are not exactly immediate either. Companies need to appreciate this is a marathon, not a sprint, and be prepared to invest time and resource to it.

Against such a backdrop, Broadband wondered, where much has been achieved but there is evidently much more still to do, what would McCool say to a young female graduate considering entering the industry for the first time?

“I would tell them that the industry can deliver a fulfilling, varied and successful career and more than ever before the industry is adapting to support women in their careers.” That’s all very well, but it isn’t the whole story.

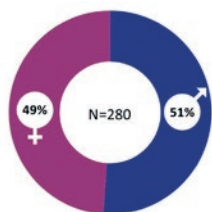
McCool smiled. “No of course. I would also be honest and tell them that as with many technology and engineering based industries, there exists a legacy (albeit steadily improving) of societal bias and established organisational structures designed by and for men. Therefore, female graduates will have to be prepared, not just for hard work, but to strive for those opportunities potentially in the face of challenging biases and structures.”



The Survey – Gender, Age & Tenure

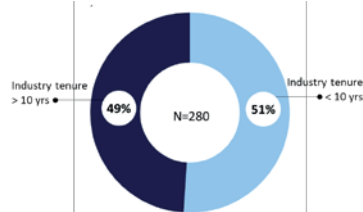
280 responses

50/50 Gender mix



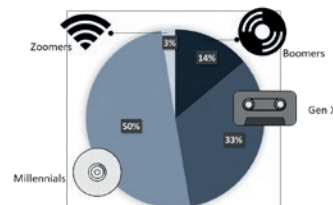
The respondent mix suggests that women were more motivated than men to fill in the survey.

50/50 Tenure mix



There are proportionally more women in the industry with shorter tenure & less with longer tenure

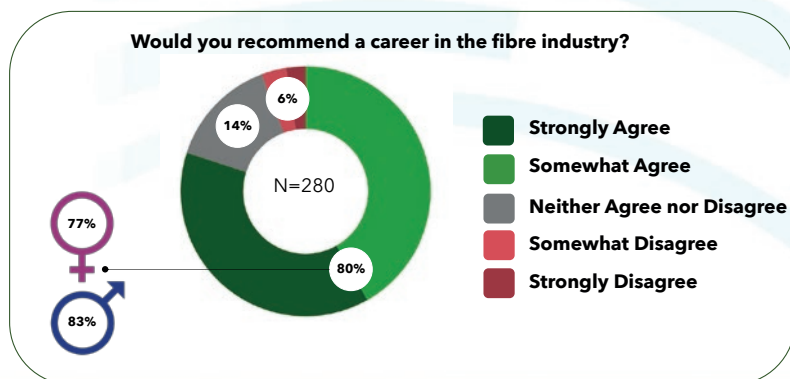
88% 25 – 56 years old



There are proportionally more respondents that are Millennials or Gen X than Boomers or Zoomers

Is the fibre industry a good place to work?

The majority of respondents said they would recommend a career in the fibre industry. This proportion was different by gender, but not significantly so.



It also comes down to legacy, McCool feels. “I also hope that women who follow me into the industry will have their path smoothed by my efforts and those like me, in the way that mine was smoothed by those women that came before me. The dream is to see women share, equally, the benefits and opportunities that this industry can offer.”

She’s right; we wouldn’t be where we are now without the efforts of women in

the workplace before us, though McCool was cautious. “But it is a long road, I expect it will be a case of evolution rather than revolution and that can take time. We must be constantly vigilant and keep pushing forward. Leaders within the industry, like those involved with FTTH Council EU have to stand up as allies, be counted and make their voices heard for those that follow us.”

She is right. There are powerful and intelligent women all across our sector doing great work to change the landscape for future generations of female talent; it is an exciting time to be in fibre, and indeed report on it at Broadband Journal. Crystal ball time, I thought. What did McCool see happening in a decade’s time? There’s the dream, and there is the reality. Is there any overlap at all?

“The industry is working hard to remove unconscious bias from access to opportunity. The FTTH Council EU and organisations within the industry are committed to delivering a fair and equitable playing field for all staff irrespective of gender,” she said. That’s all very laudable, but with respect, everyone is trying to do that. Nobody wants an inequitable playing field.

Broadband is looking forward to following up with McCool and the FTTH Council EU Women in Fibre team in a year’s time to see how things are progressing.



For more information, see www.ftthcouncil.eu/about-us/committees-and-working-groups/women-in-fibre