

A Woman's Place

Lessons learned as a woman in the water industry

Interview compiled by Amy McIntosh



Kristen E. Braden is director of construction operations for H.R. Gray Inc. in Columbus, Ohio. In this role, she provides construction management for public construction projects as well as construction claims management and resolution services. Braden has a Bachelor's degree in civil engineering from Vanderbilt University, a Master of Science degree in civil engineering from the University of Texas and a Juris Doctor degree from the University of Cincinnati. Braden can be reached at kbraden@hrgray.com.

Men historically have been at the helm of the water industry, but as more women enter science, technology, engineering and math programs, the gender gap is narrowing. Gender equality in these fields is continuing to make strides, and women are more frequently rising to the top. W&WD Associate Editor Amy McIntosh asked Kristen E. Braden, director of construction operations for H.R. Gray Inc., about her experience in this male-dominated industry.

Amy McIntosh: How have you seen the water industry change for women since you began your career?

Kristen Braden: I would have to say that over the past 10 to 15 years, I have seen more women in the water industry. Not that there are more opportunities for women per se, but there are just more opportunities across the board. I have also noticed more women in positions of authority on the owner side. Currently, the city of Columbus [Ohio] has two female directors—one in public utilities and one in public service.

Although I do not believe that this trend has trickled down to construction sites and plant operations, I believe that as we start seeing more women in the industry—in particular in positions of authority—that this will breed more opportunity and we will see more women in those areas as well.

McIntosh: Why do you think it is important for women to be represented in the water industry?

Braden: Women need to be represented in the water industry because it is a very important, necessary industry. There is a great deal of opportunity, as this is an industry that is not going away. Opportunities abound in this industry in the areas of improved innovation, advancing technology and efficiency. The sky is the limit as the water industry is still coming into its own. Additionally, women are very team oriented, and diverse work groups make better decisions.

McIntosh: What challenges have you faced as a woman in the water industry and how have you overcome them?

Braden: One challenge was learning how to effectively

Words of Advice

For women interested in a career in the water industry, Braden offers some guidance.

"My first piece of advice is don't be afraid to get dirty," she said. "Working in the field is tough and you will get dirty, but the rewards are worth it."

Seeking internships allows students and job-seekers to try out various roles in different companies. This can be a great way for a young professional to gain footing in the water industry while building a solid resume, Braden said. This also is a good way to see if certain jobs or companies are a good fit for a candidate's interests.

"Be willing to start at the bottom. Learn everything you can about every aspect of the industry," Braden said. "I promise your time will not be wasted. Everything you learn you will be able to apply later in your career."

communicate with my male counterparts. I had to learn to take constructive criticism for exactly what it was—constructive. It was in my nature to take things personally. Once I realized that this feedback was meant to improve project outcomes and not an attack on me personally, my communication improved significantly.

Another challenge is connecting with other women in the industry. Because there are definitely more men in this industry, it becomes tough to find other women to share experiences with and use as a sounding board. For that very reason, it is important for those of us in the industry to reach out and connect with/mentor other women—in particular the younger generation of water industry professionals. We want to make sure we retain and help grow good female talent.

McIntosh: What have you learned from being a woman in a male-dominated field?

Braden: I definitely have learned to "not sweat the small stuff." Our male counterparts are good about letting the little things go, so that is something I learned from them. For example, once an issue is resolved, it is my nature to go back through the issue and see if there is anything I could have done differently to resolve the conflict earlier or with a more advantageous outcome. I have learned to identify a lesson learned and then move on. I try to not beat myself up over "what ifs."

I also realized that there is more of a difference between the younger generations (Millennials and Generation Xers) than between men and women. Specifically, styles of communication and use of technology are two major differences. Dealing with the competing desire for electronic communication as opposed to face-to-face communication is a challenge. Also, the younger generations seem to need faster responses and more positive reinforcement.

The workplace is a very complicated place, and for women in this industry, it seems like it takes so long to gain the respect of your coworkers and it is unfortunately very easy to lose it. Your actions as a female are scrutinized, and some male counterparts actively look for reasons to not respect a female coworker. Certain behavior and language may be condoned or celebrated if coming from a male, but condemned if coming from a female. You simply must be aware of the double standard, and I try to watch myself and my actions to ensure that I don't lose the respect of my coworkers. **w&wd**

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