



Article

Tips to empower women working in the AEC industry

In honor of International Women's Day, I asked some of my female colleagues if, when reflecting on their careers, they had insight or ideas for how women can empower themselves and each other to build successful careers in an industry where women comprise only 14% of full-time wage and salary workers.

To gain a range of perspectives, I interviewed colleagues from Haley & Aldrich and other architecture, engineering, and construction (AEC) industry companies including Skanska, McNamara Salvia, and JL Donahue Engineering. I deeply appreciate the perspective of these women, and I think that anyone in the AEC industry can learn something valuable from these tips and anecdotes below, whether you are a female, male, AEC veteran, or-new to the industry.

Ask questions-



“Be confident to ask. I was often hesitant to ask questions early on in my career for fear that it would negatively appear that I’m not independently solving the problem. I now know that well-thought out questions give experienced engineers confidence that younger engineers are on the right track; I’m often more worried if an engineer doesn’t have any questions when presented with a new problem.”

--Ellen Swanson, P.E., Senior Project Manager at McNamara Salvia



“No one expects you to know everything on day one. Ask questions, and no matter what your level or title – jump in and contribute your thoughts and options. Your view and questions will stimulate conversations and can provide potential solutions that may never have been thought of.”

--Suki Murphy, Project Executive at Skanska

Be confident in yourself



“The biggest challenge I have faced in my career is negative self-talk about my abilities as a professional and female leader. It took a while for me to change my mindset and build confidence. Trust in yourself! Even if you don’t have a lot of experience in the working world you still bring value. Think about the ways you can bring your best self to work each day.”

– Andrea Donahue, Chief Human Potential Officer at Haley & Aldrich



“Don’t give up, stay with it. Change can happen rapidly or slowly. You abilities and earn respect over time.”

--Marya Gorczyca, P.E., Chief Learning & Development Officer at Haley-&Aldrich



“When I joined the Navy Construction Battalions as a Lieutenant Junior Grade in 1998, I was one of the first female officers they ever had. And as can be imagined, being one of the first females in a large, male challenge, and intimidating. I learned that things do not change on trust and respect were freely given to some, I had to earn it. But soon I for being one of the most hard-charging officers in the battalion and that

has followed me through my military career. In 2014, I was chosen to be the Commanding Officer of a full reserve battalion and lead them into Afghanistan. It’s the same in industry: don’t be intimidated, set your sights on greatness and don’t back down, and your reputation will show through your actions.”

--Jennifer Donahue, Ph.D, P.E., President at JL Donahue Engineering

Seek opportunities



“Ask for the things that will help you grow in your career. Ask to attend that training session, ask to attend the conference, ask to help start the new initiative in the office, ask for the promotion. Early in my career, I often saw my male colleagues attend more seminars or work on the larger projects... simply by asking to do so.”

--Ellen Swanson, P.E., Senior Project Manager at McNamara Salvia



“Actively seek out opportunities in areas of interest to you. I recently... of this, and the value of making your goals more visible than just to... f manager. It can have a significant impact on the types of projects you

--Grace Howard, Staff Engineer at Haley & Aldrich

Find a mentor and build your own “Board of Directors”



“Find a mentor! I didn’t have a mentor as it wasn’t as common then but there were great leaders I wanted to emulate. And today I have to wonder, what direction would my life and career have taken if I had had one?”

-Jennifer Donahue, Ph.D, P.E., President at JL Donahue Engineering

What can co-workers, managers, and company leadership do to support women in the AEC industry?



“As both a manager and a leader, it is important to be open to new ideas. I have seen many

instances where a woman has a great idea but does not speak up. As a manager, take the time to listen and brainstorm with your team and seek out opinions from those who don’t regularly share them. From there, give people enough authority to carry out their ideas or to make a decision on their own.”

– Andrea Donahue, Chief Human Potential Officer at Haley & Aldrich



“I’d encourage managers to have an “open-door” policy about asking for help and periodically

checking in with younger engineers who may seem more hesitant to approach senior staff. I enjoy when other engineers ask me challenging questions and then we work to solve them together. Creating a sense of community that supports each other and supports females to speak up will encourage employees to more readily ask each other questions, bounce ideas off each other, and create a more successful company.”



Senior Project Manager at McNamara-Salvia

“Be actively inclusive! Invite people to have a seat at the table and to lean in. In school, girls are

praised for raising one’s hand and waiting to be called. Unfortunately, that does not meet the speed of business. Help those talented individuals find their voice.”

--Catherine Ellis, P.E., G.E., former Senior Client Leader at Haley-&-Aldrich

There is no single solution for increasing the number of women in the AEC industry – but making change begins with the individual. And these tips, advice, and anecdotes provide a valuable springboard for all of us to think critically about where we are, where we would like to be, and how we can use our sphere of influence to better support women in our industry.

Thanks to Ellen, Suki, Andrea, Marya, Jennifer, Grace, and Catherine for sharing your perspectives!-