



Heavy construction – women work as well as men

Jackie Jones

The days when the heavy construction workforce was almost exclusively populated by men are in the past. Employers are attracting women to all levels in the industry.

“Manitoba’s heavy construction industry is dedicated to attract, educate, train and recruit young women, but it has some ways to go to get the word out,” says Nicole Chabot, MHCA Board Chair and Vice-president of L. Chabot Enterprises.

Samantha Line, 25, is a lab technician at Munro Group’s Lilyfield Quarry. A University of Manitoba graduate in Environmental Studies, she has worked with Manitoba Infrastructure’s water management structures division, and for Manitoba Hydro at the Keeyask hydroelectric generating station.

“I grew up in a family that was from the construction sector and the farming sector,” says Line. “I was not raised to be an office worker.”

The experience of working in a remote location while at Keeyask – the camp was outside of Gillam – helped prepare her for work in a male-dominated field.

Line says she feels women need to consider their opportunities in construction, noting there is a wide variety of jobs to be had and good careers. “It’s not an industry that’s meant for men only. Women can do this just as well as men can.”

She understands why some might be intimidated at the thought of operating large pieces of heavy equipment, but advises that women should give themselves a break and just get started.

“You don’t start with 10 years of experience. You have to start somewhere and you have to be kind to yourself when you start.”

She notes that heavy construction offers a diverse work environment. “You can do pretty much anything you want within the construction industry. There are so many opportunities for development, for your goals and your skills.”

Line’s job is test samples of crushed rock to ensure they meet roadbuilding specifications for aggregates, set by project owners, such as the City of Winnipeg and Manitoba Infrastructure. She also does water-level monitoring at the quarry, in the RM of Rosser.

Quarry work was new to her, and after about a week’s worth of training, she was on her own, working things out.

“You make mistakes, but that’s okay. You’re not going to be perfect, Day 1.”

Line says her work environment has been welcoming and the co-workers are helpful and respectful.

She loves the independence working for Munro has given her at Lilyfield, and she can see the potential for career growth.

“You can’t be what you can’t see,” Chabot states. “I think there is a need to highlight the success stories to really put that in front of people and especially young girls and women and have them know that there is lots of opportunity here for them.”

Chabot has been part of the construction industry for most of her life and encourages women to seek all the support they need to do the best job possible. She knows the frustrations of working in a male-dominated industry but also emphasizes the benefits it can have.

“Some days will be infuriating at times. Call it out but do not let it get to you,” she advises. “Working hard and being confident is key. Remember that there will be many times when you will bring a different perspective to the table, which is a great advantage. This will make it easier to stand out and your stakeholders will more likely to remember you.”

In a usually male-dominated industry, things are improving as employers start to see the benefit of a diverse workforce. Even though there are further steps to go, the point is clear: Don’t fear stepping outside your comfort zone, get the support you need, and be the best you can be.

“There’s so much growth and innovation going on now,” Chabot said. “I think it’s a great opportunity for anyone who is interested in a career in construction to get in now, but certainly for our young women out there.”

MHCA, with industry and government partners, has entered into agreements for introductory courses aimed at women and students, in River East Transcona and Seven Oaks school divisions, says MHCA President Chris Lorenc.

“The MHCA has deliberately scaled up its initiatives to reach diverse groups and show young or mature workers who are unaware of the opportunities, what heavy construction can offer them,” says Lorenc.

For example, the Seven Oaks School Division will see students, starting this month, enroll in the 10-month Introduction to Heavy Construction Program, an outcome of a partnership between the school division, the Manitoba Construction Sector Council and the MHCA. It will offer students training in heavy equipment operation with simulators, mechanical repair and welding of heavy equipment, blasting and drilling with simulators, safety training and surveying, and an extended work practicum. Upon completion, students receive eight credits toward the Mature Student Status High School Diploma.



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