

Not Just a Pipe Dream

QUESTIONS BY LISA TAYLOR WITH DANNIELLE JAMES.
PICTURES BY ANGE HAYWARD.

Let's start by learning a little about Pipe Pro Drilling

Jason and I established Pipe Pro Directional Drilling in 2013 as a drilling company that had, initially, one employee, a truck and a drilling rig. Today, we have 10 employees who work in three different crews all over Victoria installing a range of different pipelines using this specialised trenchless technology. In addition to directional drilling, we also provide our clients with traditional excavation methods, vacuum excavation and asbestos removal. In total, we now have four directional drill rigs in operation and a fleet of over 20 plant and trucks supplying underground pipe infrastructure to a range of different clients.

In 2017, we were fortunate to win the Federation Business School Innovation Award at the Commerce Ballarat Business Excellence Awards, and then in 2018 we won the Central Highlands Water Trade Business Award.

In 2019, we will be expanding our office buildings and hiring new administrative staff to further grow the business so that it becomes the best directional drilling company in Victoria.

We have also hired our first female labourer in the company and Stephanie is a welcome addition to our team.

With drilling being a sector that has predominantly male workers, how hard do you believe it is for a female to enter this industry?

I first entered the industry in 2008 when I took a position working in the iron ore mines in the Pilbara, WA. It was very intimidating to begin with; not only was I entering a workplace that was male dominated but it was also a fly-in-fly-out position, so I was living in a mining camp for four weeks at a time.

At the time I commenced, there were 10 women and over 100 men working together. At that stage in my life, I was working as an administrative assistant for a drilling and rail company, which was the type of job most women did in that industry back then. There were very few female truck drivers or miners. Although it was challenging at the time, it was confidence building, and I learnt a great deal about the industry.

Fast-forward 10 years to now owning a civil construction company with my husband, and I think it is harder for women to enter the industry here in Victoria compared to the mining industry generally. I rarely see women apply for positions within our company, and there still seems to be a stigma attached to women entering male-dominated trades. Unfortunately, I think that affects young women's confidence in even applying for these types of positions.

Can you share some of the challenges you have experienced?

The challenges I have experienced have centred around being a business owner in this industry. Jason and I started Pipe Pro Directional Drilling together five years ago, knowing what our strengths were and realising that we brought different skills to the business that were crucial for its success. Jason's strength is his expertise in directional drilling and mine is in business management and development. However, I am regularly mistaken for his personal assistant or the bookkeeper rather than an equal partner in the business.

It is frustrating to be labelled as an assistant rather than an equal partner because of my gender.

I am passionate about supporting other women in business, and being on the board of the Ballarat business women's networking group, I have found that there are other women in similar situations to mine who are directors of companies facing the same challenges, whether it is in the trades or other industries.

What are some of the prejudices women continue to encounter?

I think a lot of people still believe there are "male" trades and "female" trades. And speaking with other women in these industries, there is still the perception that if females are working in civil construction, they must be working in the "office".

Regardless of the particular industry, I think society still struggles to recognise businesswomen on their own merits. In my experience, I have to work really hard to be accepted as a leader in my industry, whereas my husband is automatically praised and recognised as being a successful businessman. Which, of course, he is, but we are a partnership and therefore we rely on each other's strengths to make our company a success. Both of our roles are equally as important.

How does Pipe Pro Drilling approach equality with hiring new team members?

Having firsthand experience of gender inequality during my working life, not just in construction and mining but also in other industries, I feel passionate about offering men and women the same opportunities within Pipe Pro Directional Drilling. Our recruiting process is based not only on experience but also on attitude. For example, at times an enthusiastic candidate, who is eager to learn new skills and expand their knowledge in the field, can be more suitable to fill a position than a candidate with more experience.

The gender of a candidate is also not relevant to how well they can do their job. In recently employing Stephanie, we saw a positive, hardworking woman who had not been given the opportunity in the past to develop her skills in the civil construction industry due to her gender. I need to also mention that during this recent round of recruitment, we also hired a young man who brings a different set of skills to the team. Both are impressive young people who demonstrate a passion for the work they do and commitment to improve and develop their skills while working in our team.

What are your top tips for girls and women wanting to head in this career direction?

For school-aged girls, undertake a lot of work experience in a range of trades and industries that you're interested in. Most employers are more than happy to take on people keen to spend a few days or a week wanting to learn. The firsthand experience you receive from that work will give you an insight into whether that trade is suited to you. And when you find something you love, set a goal and start working towards achieving it.

There will be people who doubt you along the way, and some may even say you won't be able to achieve it because of your gender, but if you want something bad enough and are willing to work for it, then your dreams are not out of reach.

In addition, there are many great support groups for women in the trades that provide opportunities to not only network with other women who may be facing the same challenges as you but also to hear success stories from women who have achieved their goals. In particular, one group that does a great job and that I have been closely involved with is Tradeswomen Australia.

Words from Stephanie Findlay

Briefly describe your work history and background

In my early 20s, I was an office worker and a kitchen hand/cook. In 2010, I got my foot in the door of the construction industry as a traffic controller for various roadworks around Victoria. From there, I spent eight years learning and growing to become a senior team leader for major traffic management projects

With drilling being a sector that has predominantly male workers, how hard do you believe it is for a female to enter this industry?

It wasn't particularly difficult to get into traffic management as a first step as there are quite a few women already working in that area. I just needed the correct qualifications and attitude. But when it comes to civil construction, it is incredibly hard for women to get into the industry as I have found there is little to no support for females to grow and become machinery operators.

Can you share some of the challenges you have experienced?

In my early years in traffic management, I was treated with a lack of respect and was automatically deemed incompetent because of my gender and age as I was quite a bit younger than most of my peers. On top of this, I encountered sexual harassment from fellow co-workers and even from clients that we worked for.

In the second year of working in traffic management, I realised that I really wanted to become an excavator operator and that was my dream. So I decided to spend a few more years in traffic management to gain more knowledge and experience before I started to apply for positions at various civil construction companies. I also asked questions of some management personnel that I met around the different worksites regarding working in civil construction. Some would tell me that they had nothing for me due to my lack of experience and many others would also add that I would never get a chance to get my foot in the door and gain experience due to my gender. Many companies are very reluctant to even consider hiring a woman to operate machinery. I have lost count of how many times I have been told I would not achieve my dream because I am female.

What are some of the prejudices women continue to encounter?

Women are not given the same or equal opportunities in the civil construction industry despite that fact that most companies in this sector promote the point that they are equal opportunity workplaces. What you usually find is that the women are only employed in stereotypical "female" roles such as in the office.

I have also found that women are often treated as sexual objects in the civil construction industry and it is assumed they are not capable of doing a "man's job".

I was told by quite a few people that many companies don't hire female civil construction workers because they're worried about potential sexual harassment complaints, which is really disappointing. However, despite these negatives, I do believe this industry is slowly starting to change.

What are your top tips for girls and women wanting to head in this career direction?

Believe in yourself and don't give up.

Educate yourself and complete training courses that appeal to prospective employers. There are many government-funded courses and TAFE apprenticeships and traineeships, so do your research.

Spend time getting yourself accredited for the field you want be in.

Spend time in similar industries if you can. For me that was traffic management. When it was possible, I would always watch the civil construction crews who were working alongside us and really try to take in how the machinery operated. I would often ask questions and even take notes.

Do your research on the company that is offering a position that you are applying for. It may help you to find the right company that will be prepared to give you a go.

I have now been appointed to a position at Pipe Pro Directional Drilling where I'm being properly trained in the job and have been given the chance to be an excavator operator, and I couldn't be happier!

