



Career story: Staying true to yourself

This career story features an engineer and educator who is passionate about bringing more young people, and particularly women, into engineering. Sally Male has a strong background in engineering and has completed numerous projects which encourage gender inclusion in engineering and computing. Her career story is a great resource for understanding the importance of being true to yourself, even when you are in a field where you are a gender minority.



“My interest began at an engineering camp when at school. I saw someone who had been at the camp and I thought ... maybe engineering?”

Sally Male’s story

Dr Sally Male is a Perth-based engineer and educator. The main motivator for choosing an engineering career came unexpectedly, during a maths camp at high school.

Sally started to attend industry events and by doing this she made important connections that would help inform her future career. At university, she continued to build her networks by joining the ‘Women in Engineering’ group, where she met leading figures such as Sue Murphy. The now-retired Ms Murphy led the Water Corporation for ten years after working at engineering firm Clough.

After completing her degree in engineering, Sally began research focussed on engineering education, higher education and gender equity - in both engineering and computing. Male is passionate about gender inclusivity and providing the best opportunities for students to develop their skills and capabilities before entering the workplace.

A passion for STEM and a chance encounter at a high school camp led Sally into the challenging and equally rewarding field of engineering. Since becoming an engineer, she has published countless papers and become the Chair of Engineering Education at her university.

Stay true to yourself

“A lot of women who do Engineering take on a kind of masculine way of acting and dressing, to not stand out among the men ... I’ve always admired the women who remain feminine in their dress and manner.”

Male has experienced the challenges of being a woman in a male-dominated field and she admits that when she first became an engineer, she felt the need to change herself to fit in. It may have been something as small as not finding steel-capped boots to fit, or the pressure to swear when in conversations on a mine site, but she noticed the women who refused to change. These were women who refused to “fit in” and who became successful in engineering.

“There has been literature for decades from around the world where it’s understood that every time women join a new team they have to prove themselves, their technical credibility is doubted, whereas the males’ credibility is taken for granted. So women feel that they have to forever remind people that they are engineers. They see gender ahead of being an engineer.”

To get into engineering, you have to be extremely dedicated – a capable student in both maths and science. Yet capable women often leave a profession because they are not taken seriously and begin to doubt their abilities. Sally encourages every graduate to be confident in their abilities, to be confident in their education and to have confidence in their employers, who have chosen them above countless other graduates in a hugely competitive market. Her message is: “Don’t be afraid to prove yourself and demonstrate what you have worked so hard to learn”.

Key message: stand up for yourself and for others

The message you can take away from this career story is that not all workplaces are going to be an easy transition from university: some workplaces will be female dominated, others will be male dominated, or maybe the workplace is simply very competitive. Whatever the case, things can always be improved.

“The most important thing moving forward is improving culture in the workplace. We need everyone’s eyes to be opened to what is happening and everyone willing to speak out against discrimination. It is the right of every staff member to contribute and feel valued in their workplace.”

If you see discrimination in the workplace, don’t be afraid to speak out, whether that means a quiet word to a colleague, not condoning a display of discrimination or prejudice, or seeking advice from someone senior or a trusted friend. If we all notice and act on negativity at work or in our study and social lives, we can enable everyone to work and contribute to the very best of their abilities.

Make it count

Discrimination occurs in multiple forms and contexts. Reflect on a time when you have felt the “odd one out” or when you have seen a colleague, friend, acquaintance or family member be made to feel uncomfortable because of their difference. Perhaps this related to someone not being great at something (a sport, for example), their physical or mental state, their cultural background, or their clothes. Write a few lines about what happened. You may not have done anything about it at the time. That’s okay! Make a note of what you might be able to do the next time a similar situation arises. If you feel that you are the subject of discrimination, seek help from a trusted friend or family member, doctor, or counsellor.

Learning from biographies and career stories

What do you see when you meet a professional?

Most of the time, we see only the role someone holds now. It is likely, however, that the person has experienced a career with lots of twists and turns.

Get the most out of reading career stories or biographies by asking yourself some of the questions to the right.

1. What do you expect you will have to learn during your career?
2. What might you need to do in order to keep learning?
3. What differences, common issues, and links can you make to your own career journey?
4. Identify and reflect on key decision points in your personal and professional development, and then consider:
 - a. Who played a significant role at these times?
 - b. To whom did you go to for advice?
 - c. What can you put in place for the next time you face a major decision?
5. Biographical accounts raise a number of challenges and opportunities. These include innovative collaborations, work within other sectors, diverse locations, and different modes of work. Look for examples of these in your discipline and reflect on what might be of interest to you:
 - a. What interests you, and what can you do to make this a reality?
 - b. What challenges do you foresee, and how will you prepare for these?
6. Biographical accounts often tell us something about the interests, passions, and motivations of the people involved. Can you think of ways to combine your interests and your future work?
7. What would you like to achieve as a professional?

This resource was developed by Emily Bennett, biomedical sciences student at the University of Western Australia