



Pathway to Success:

Accelerating Women in Leadership

Introduction

At Odgers, we are committed to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion. Through a series of roundtables and events, we explored the experiences and aspirations of women in leadership across Australia's broad industrial sectors, from mining & resources, transport & infrastructure, defence & aviation, to process industries & manufacturing. These conversations revealed both ongoing challenges and significant opportunities for change.

A recent panel in Melbourne, Pathway to Success: Women in Leadership, brought together senior leaders to share personal insights and practical strategies for advancing gender equity.

We thank our guest speakers:

- **Lucy Nation**, Country President, bp Australia
- **Mark Collette**, Managing Director, EnergyAustralia
- **Mary Wooldridge**, CEO, Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA)

Their contributions helped shape a powerful and actionable dialogue. While grounded in the Australian context, the themes and learnings are globally relevant.



Key Themes & Insights in Accelerating Women's Industrial Leadership

Women in Industrial Workforce

27%

Share of Industrial sector workforce (vs 73% men) – unchanged in 10 years

Female Industrial CEOs

9%

Only 95 of CEOs in the industrial sector are women (reflecting a stark leadership gap)

No Women on Board

41%

Industrial companies with zero women on their board of directors

Median Pay Gap (Construction)

25.3%

Median gender pay gap in construction sector – half of firms exceed this gap

The Current Landscape: Why Change Is Needed

Women remain significantly under-represented in industrial leadership, highlighting the urgent need for change. As WGEA CEO Mary Wooldridge noted, women make up just 27% of the industrial workforce, a figure unchanged for over a decade. This static representation means gender segregation remains entrenched in the industrials sector. Women's presence thins out further up the hierarchy: they hold about a quarter of management and executive positions yet make up a mere 9% of CEOs in the sector.

These numbers illustrate a persistent leadership gap. Board representation is similarly lacking, with 41% of industrial companies having no female directors. Wooldridge described this as "stunning," especially given the strong link between genderdiverse leadership and improved business performance and equality outcomes.

There has been modest progress on gender pay gaps, which have narrowed by 3.5–5 percentage points across sub-sectors over the past decade. Yet gaps remain substantial. For example, construction has a median pay gap of 25.3%, with 81% of firms above the national average. Women also remain under-represented in higher-paying roles, comprising only 17% of top quartile earners.

The takeaway:

Despite some progress, the sector has struggled to move the needle on key gender equality metrics in the past 10 years. The leadership gap and persistent pay disparities underscore the need for accelerated action. At the same time, these challenges present clear opportunities, greater inclusion can unlock broader talent pools and drive better decision-making. The panellists focused on how to turn awareness into action, which the following themes explore.



From Intention to Outcome: Leadership Accountability for Change

A recurring theme was the shift from knowing better to doing better. While many organisations have gender equity strategies, real progress depends on leadership accountability. Panellists stressed that gender equality must be treated like any core business priority with clear targets, data tracking, and personal ownership.

Set measurable targets and use data to drive action

Mary Wooldridge highlighted new legislation requiring large employers to select and meet Gender Equality Targets over a 3-year period. Employers select their targets as part of normal annual reporting to WGEA and then progress is monitored with each subsequent year of reporting. This marks a shift from simply reporting data to using it to inform action. Companies have time to investigate their data and to develop data-driven goals before they need to select targets in 2026. She encouraged leaders to use this as an opportunity: analyse your data (e.g. by department or level) and use it to determine what needs to be addressed. Importantly, these targets should be monitored like any KPI and embedded into business reviews.

Make accountability visible and operational

Vanessa Torres provided a powerful example from her company, South32, on internal accountability. As COO, she asks her operations to track the percentage of females in leadership appointments to set clear expectations (and making it part of performance reviews/bonuses).

This approach has driven changes in recruitment, promotion, and talent development, resulting in significantly improved gender representation.

Apply proven business strategies to diversity goals

Mark Collette emphasised that gender diversity should be managed with the same rigour as financial or operational targets. At EnergyAustralia, a deliberate strategy transformed a male-dominated executive team into a gender-balanced one, unlocking cultural and performance benefits. As he put it,



Targets make the plan real, but the goal is stronger teams, better decisions, and workplaces where everyone thrives.



Challenge structural and attitudinal barriers

Leaders must confront excuses that hinder progress. Structural issues like EBAs or rigid rosters shouldn't be accepted as immovable. Legacy hiring practices such as "like promotes like", must be disrupted through diverse shortlists, mixed interview panels, and broader selection criteria to uncover high-potential women for traditionally male-dominated roles.

The takeaway:

Visible leadership commitment and structured accountability are essential. Organisations that accelerate women into leadership do so because their top leaders prioritise it: they set targets (and meet them), weave gender metrics into business reviews, and refuse to accept the status quo as immovable. This "tone from the top" creates a mandate for real change.



Inclusive Culture: Creating an Environment Where Everyone Can Thrive

Representation alone is not enough. The panel emphasised that culture plays a critical role. Women must not only be present in industrial workplaces but also feel genuinely included and valued. Inclusion is key to retention and advancement.

Mark Collette shared insights from employee engagement sessions, where women described everyday barriers – from subtle exclusion to logistical challenges. These stories, he explained, were pivotal in shaping EnergyAustralia's "At Our Best" strategy.



Creating an inclusive culture means more than updating policies or facilities. It's about how we work together. When women feel heard and valued, everything shifts. Conversations broaden, decisions improve, and workplaces thrive.



One practical shift was ensuring women's voices were actively heard. When EnergyAustralia promoted women into previously all-male leadership teams, some colleagues made dismissive remarks. Mark addressed this by consistently inviting the new female leaders to contribute, reinforcing their expertise. This set a new norm: women's perspectives were expected and respected. Over time, meetings became more inclusive, women were less interrupted, collaboration improved, and the tone shifted from bravado to respect.

With a critical mass of women, discussions expanded beyond traditional views to include customer needs and social trends, driving better business outcomes.

The panel also challenged the "ideal worker" norm; an always-available leadership style historically aligned with men who had stay-at-home partners. This model can exclude those with caregiving responsibilities or different work styles. Inclusive cultures redefine merit, valuing outcomes, collaboration, and balanced leadership over facetime and endurance.

Mark introduced symbolic but impactful practices, such as scheduling non-urgent emails for the morning and adding "no need to reply until tomorrow" to late-night messages. These signals show respect for personal time and help dispel the myth of 24/7 availability. Flexible work arrangements were also encouraged, recognising that productivity comes from smart work, not long hours. This flexibility supports both women and men managing family responsibilities.

Finally, the panel highlighted the power of belonging and authenticity. When under-represented groups no longer feel the need to constantly adapt or prove themselves, they can focus on excelling. Lucy Nation noted that having multiple women in leadership creates a virtuous cycle; providing role models, normalising women's presence, and helping others see a future for themselves. Inclusion, the panel agreed, is the foundation that makes other changes sustainable. Without it, hiring and promotion efforts risk becoming a revolving door.

Flexible Work & Support: Breaking Barriers to Retention and Advancement

A consistent theme throughout the discussion was the importance of flexible work arrangements and supportive policies, especially around caregiving, to enable women's career progression. In many industrial settings, rigid schedules and limited accommodations have historically led to mid-career drop-offs. Addressing this is essential for accelerating progress.

Normalising flexible and part-time work

Mary Wooldridge shared a striking statistic: only 6% of industrial sector employees work part-time, compared to 21% across all industries. Among industrial managers, just 3% work part-time, indicating that senior roles rarely offer flexibility. In cultures not designed for part-time work, it can be especially challenging. One solution is job-sharing. For example, two women have successfully shared a management role for 20 years and now mentor others. Anyone transitioning to part-time receives a briefing from them to learn practical strategies. Supporting these arrangements helps retain talent that might otherwise leave.

Leaders must also be open-minded. If a valued engineer requests a 4-day week to care for family, the role should be redesigned to make it feasible. It is not enough to offer part-time options; they must be culturally accepted. Leaders should affirm that flexible workers are equally committed and have career potential. Flexibility is a critical foundation for advancement, particularly in sectors with long or irregular hours.

Parental leave for all genders

One of the most impactful changes discussed was making parental leave accessible and normal for men. Mark Collette explained that supporting women's careers means removing barriers at every stage, from flexible work to inclusive parental leave. When balance is normalised, everyone benefits.

EnergyAustralia introduced 20 weeks of paid parental leave for all genders and actively encouraged men to take it.



The real shift came when men began using the benefit. Initially, there was resistance, but as more fathers took leave, it became routine. This helped dismantle the idea that caregiving is solely a woman's role. Now, both mothers and fathers can step away for family without career setbacks. WGEA data shows that while only 17% of primary-carer leave is taken by men across industries, in industrial companies the figure is 31%. Encouraging shared caregiving supports women's advancement by reducing the career penalty often associated with motherhood.

Lucy Nation added that companies offering paid parental leave and continuing retirement contributions during leave send a strong message of support. For example, EnergyAustralia contributes to superannuation even during unpaid leave, helping protect long-term financial security.

Reinventing career paths around life events

Lucy shared her personal experience of navigating career and family simultaneously. She had three children by age 35 and took on a major operational role while pregnant, with support from colleagues who adapted tasks to her needs. Her story illustrates that women's career paths may not be linear, and organisations should accommodate that. Programmes that keep employees connected during leave and support smooth re-entry are vital.

Lucy eventually became the only mother on a global refinery leadership team, thanks to a supportive boss who embraced flexibility. The panel agreed that mid-career is a critical turning point. Many women face stalled progress in their 30s due to family pressures and lack of support. Offering flexible schedules, remote work, re-entry programmes, and encouraging shared responsibilities at home helps keep women in the leadership pipeline.

Mark highlighted his company's shift to results-based performance evaluations, which reduce bias against those using flexible arrangements. Lucy noted that the second decade of a woman's career is often when progress falters, making targeted support essential.

In summary, flexibility and leave policies are not perks but strategic tools for enabling gender diversity. They allow women and caregivers of all genders to pursue demanding careers without unsustainable sacrifices. As Mark put it, "we just had to plan differently," and once flexibility became routine, it simply became how business is done.

Mentorship & Sponsorship: Bridging the Mid-Career Gap

A key insight from the panel was the transformative role of mentorship, sponsorship, and targeted development in accelerating women's advancement. While data can highlight issues and policies can remove barriers, it is often active guidance and advocacy that propel women into senior leadership.

Lucy captured this well:



Having a strong pool of really good mentors focusing on that 10 to 20 year career stage is more transformative than anything else.



Early-career women often do fine (hired in equal numbers as men), but as they approach higher management, they face unique challenges or inflection points.

As Lucy observed, these are seldom one-size problems – could be confidence gaps, lack of visibility, a boss she is finding difficult, or juggling family – so tailored, one-on-one support is key. A mentor who knows the individual can advise on the right intervention, whether it's recommending her for a high-profile project, coaching through work-life dilemmas, or simply saying "you can do this."

Several contributors noted that losing senior female mentors can hurt progress. They worried that after some top women left their organisations, younger women lost those role models and champions. This suggests companies should institutionalize mentorship (so it doesn't vanish with personnel changes) for example, formal mentorship programmes pairing upcoming women with leaders (male or female) who commit to supporting them.

Sponsorship - going beyond advice to actively open doors - was emphasised as a critical lever. A sponsor advocates for a woman's advancement, recommending her for stretch roles or leadership opportunities. For example, gaining profit and loss responsibility is often a stepping stone to executive or board roles. If women are concentrated in support functions, sponsors should help them access operational or financial leadership roles. Mentors can guide women to seek these experiences, while sponsors ensure they are selected for them.

Mark Collette mentioned his own approach: talent reviews with a "mirror" held up. Their People & Culture team tracks promotion rates by gender and prompts discussions: Are women getting equal opportunities for advancement? If not, why? This data-driven mentorship helps identify, "broken rungs", points where women are not advancing proportionately. By spotting that, they can assign mentors or development plans to high-potential women who might otherwise be overlooked. Mark said they've moved from focusing only on the top (where outcomes look gender-fair) to broadly across the organisation; because if women aren't moving up at lower levels, the top won't sustain parity.



Peer networks were also acknowledged. The panel encouraged creating forums for women to share experiences. Sometimes hearing others' stories or advice can inspire action. For instance, Lucy's aunt and sister gave her life-changing advice on partner choice and timing of children, now Lucy "pays it forward" by mentoring younger women with those insights. Within companies, women's networks or resource groups can facilitate mentorship circles and collective problem-solving (e.g., a working mothers'/parents' group to swap coping strategies).

Importantly, men also play a role as mentors and sponsors. Many people recounted how male allies helped their careers. Lucy's male colleague, who took photos for her on-site when she was pregnant, is a great example of informal sponsorship; he used his privilege (mobility on the plant) to ensure she could still perform. Senior men who are "champions of change" can mentor emerging women leaders, push for their promotion, and model inclusive leadership to other men. "Where do men sit in this conversation?" – the answer is, side by side with women, owning the change. The panel encouraged men in leadership to actively mentor women and call out bias, not see gender equity as a "women's issue."

Finally, structured development programmes can complement mentorship by building skills and confidence. For instance, sending women to leadership training, industry conferences, or cross-functional assignments gives them exposure and growth. The panel noted that boards are increasingly scrutinising equity via remuneration and performance, so companies are incentivised to invest in female talent pipelines. Some companies implement sponsorship initiatives, pairing high-potential women with executive sponsors who shepherd their career for a year or more – an approach likely to gain traction given these discussions.

Insight: "It is not a one-size-fits-all problem," Lucy said of the mid-career female exodus. Thus, one-on-one mentorship and tailored advocacy are among the most effective tools. They provide the personal touch, someone in your corner, that can make the difference between persevering or opting out. The panel's consensus was that organisations serious about accelerating women must cultivate a culture of mentorship and an expectation that leaders (of all genders) will actively lift others as they rise.

Challenging Bias and Engaging Men as Allies

The conversation also tackled the need to confront biases and involve men in the solution. Achieving gender balance isn't about women "fixing" themselves; it's about fixing systemic attitudes and getting everyone on board with a shared vision of equality.

Breaking stereotypes of leadership

Industrial sectors often carry a mental image of a leader as a masculine archetype. "Heavily masculinised industries have a stereotype of what a leader is, often associated with a man and traits men bring." Changing this requires presenting and normalising diverse leadership styles. The presence of multiple women in senior roles helps shatter the notion that one must emulate a stereotypical male style to succeed. Mark observed that when his executive team neared gender parity, it fundamentally changed colleagues' assumptions: "Balanced teams changed the nature of conversations" and broadened the definition of effective leadership. Women leaders brought different perspectives and approaches (often more collaborative and empathetic) which delivered results, thereby expanding the leadership paradigm.

However, as Lucy warned, companies can't just parachute one woman into the C-suite and declare victory. "If you appoint the first female onto an all-male team, and don't change the norms, she risks being seen as a token. Leaders should openly celebrate successes of women leaders and share stories of how different approaches lead to better outcomes, reinforcing that a good leader is not defined by gendered traits.

Addressing "the merit trap"

A common pushback is "We hire based on merit; we can't compromise standards." The panel flipped this argument. Put elegantly: how do we "trade off the merit discussion in the context of accelerating women?" The answer: broaden your view of merit. If merit historically meant a particular pedigree that few women had access to, then that definition is biased. It was emphasised that requiring certain narrow experiences (like "must have C-suite experience" or "must have run a mine") can inadvertently exclude capable women. Instead, focus on transferable skills and potential. As noted, after diversifying a team, performance did not drop;

it improved in many ways (innovation, stakeholder insight). Thus, hiring or promoting women is not charity, it's smart business.

The panel encouraged calling out false notions that diversity and merit are at odds. In fact, by actively seeking underrepresented talent, you often uncover merit that was previously overlooked.

It was highlighted that men need to see themselves as stakeholders in gender equity. It's not a zero-sum where women win and men lose. For instance, when men take parental leave, they benefit from time with family and reduced burnout, while women benefit at work; a true win-win. The panel discussed addressing feelings some men have of being "disenfranchised" by diversity efforts. The way forward is inclusivity: equity is about fairness for everyone having a fair go. If framed that way, most men can get behind a culture of fairness. It helps to share data: companies with more women leaders often perform better, and diverse teams make better decisions.

Monitoring and accountability for inclusion

Just as with targets, bias must be monitored. One idea is requiring diverse succession slates: e.g., whenever a role is up for promotion, ensure at least one woman is considered. If a department consistently promotes only men despite having female staff, investigate why (is there bias in evaluations? Are women not getting the same opportunities to lead projects that boost their profile?

In summary, demonstrating that gender equity elevates the whole team engages everyone. The panel vouched that when more voices are heard, men also often find the workplace improved; less extreme hours, a more respectful culture, and a stronger team reputation. As one insight card from the event put it: "People behave differently according to the balance of people in the room...that was really good." Indeed, balance benefits all.





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It starts with recognising the current gaps through data – the blunt facts that women are under-represented and undervalued in many areas – and then taking bold, practical steps to close those gaps.

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- Lucy Nation, Country President,
bp Australia

In conclusion, the “Pathways to Success” panel painted a comprehensive picture of how to accelerate women in industrial leadership.

It starts with recognising the current gaps through data, the blunt facts that women are under-represented and undervalued in many areas, and then taking bold, practical steps to close those gaps. Key themes included:

- **Leadership & Accountability:** Set concrete goals (e.g. % of women in leadership) and make leaders at all levels accountable for achieving them. Treat gender equity as a strategic priority, not an HR afterthought.
- **Culture of Inclusion:** Cultivate an environment where women (and all employees) feel they truly belong. This means rooting out subtle biases, ensuring women's voices are heard, and redefining the “ideal worker” to allow diverse styles.
- **Work-Life Flexibility:** Implement and normalise flexible work options and equitable parental leave. By dismantling structural barriers around hours and caregiving, companies can retain talented women through life's stages.
- **Mentorship & Sponsorship:** Provide women with mentors who guide and sponsors who advocate. Create formal and informal networks that help navigate the mid-career pinch points and open doors to key opportunities.
- **Engaging Men & Addressing Bias:** Bring men into the solution as champions and allies. Challenge notions of meritocracy that hide bias, and educate why balanced teams are better for everyone.

Every panellist echoed that real change is a journey, “always a journey”, as Lucy said; but with visible commitment, it's happening. As evidence, Mark's organisation now boasts five female executives of a nine-strong team and near-parity in the layer below, a dramatic shift from the company and industry's past. These successes were not accidental; they resulted from the deliberate actions described above. “Balanced teams change the nature of conversations. They broaden our perspectives and expand what leadership looks like.

Different voices lead to better business outcomes – diversity isn't just the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do. The progress we've made proves change is possible, but we can't mistake milestones for the finish line. The real challenge now is to keep moving forward, finding the next opportunity to bridge the gap and create environments where everyone can succeed and lead.”

Finally, the panel struck a tone of optimism and shared responsibility. The path to gender balance requires sustained effort from individuals, organisations, and even regulators; but it is clearly attainable. As Mary Wooldridge put it, it's about going from knowing what works (we have plenty of research and examples) to doing what works. Each of us in our roles can contribute: whether it's a CEO setting bold targets, a manager offering a flexible schedule to a team member, or a senior engineer mentoring a younger colleague. By connecting these actions across the industry, we create momentum toward a more equitable, inclusive future.

The overarching insight: Accelerating women in industrial leadership is not a mystery; it's a matter of commitment, culture, and accountability. The themes above provide a roadmap that, when followed, leads not only to more women in leadership, but to stronger organisations overall. The panel's experiences show that when we move from intent to outcome on gender equality, everyone wins – employees, companies, and the industry at large.

About Odgers

Odgers was founded in 1965. We offer integrated executive search and leadership advisory services through our 59 offices in 33 countries. During our 60-year history we have developed functional and sector expertise and built a global network of relationships. We are deeply rooted in our local markets, which we combine with global perspective and reach, enabling us to serve clients across six continents.

What we do matters; our work impacts peoples' lives and drives our clients' success. It is a privilege to help build the world's best leadership teams, a trusted role we never take for granted. This ethos underpins our commitment to our clients and candidates and motivates our colleagues to strive for excellence in all we do.

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Julia Soutter is the Lead Partner for Odgers Australia's industrial practice. With over 25 years of experience in executive search, Julia has built a strong reputation for advising clients on chief executive officer and senior executive appointments, which require focused search activity beyond traditional networks. Julia is a key member of the global industrial practice which brings together our international Aerospace and Defence, Transportation and Infrastructure, Mining, Resources and Energy, and Process Industries practices.

Julia began her career with the Odgers London office in 2005 as a Principal within the not-for-profit practice before relocating to Australia and working in a boutique search firm for nine years. Originally from the United Kingdom, Julia holds a Master of Arts (Honours) in International Relations and Modern History from the University of St Andrews.