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## Kirsty McIntosh: Don't just moan about inequality – put thought into how things should change

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It's been 30 years since I started working and throughout that time the attempts to try and sort the problems of gender inequality in both work and pay have been many and varied. We're still a long way from where we should be and whilst the pace of redressing the balance is incredibly frustrating I have noticed progress and now, dare I say it, momentum.

I'm fortunate in my role to work across a wide range of professions and it is noticeable to me how many women fill both technical and senior management posts – and how normal that is. There has often been talk about the need for female role models and the search for them always sounds like we're looking for needles in a haystack. However, this is not something I experience on a daily basis. Certainly, within the technology sector, it is not so evident.

There are fewer women in senior roles and when recruiting at Exmos, a leading manufacturing technology business, I estimate around 20 per cent of the software engineer applicants are female. However, on the systems engineering side we rarely get any applications at all. Therefore, we still have a lot of ground to make up and there is still much to do.

I recently attended an all-woman event which served as an excellent reminder to me of the strength and depth women have in the professions in Scotland. Most noticeable was that not one single conversation I had was about gender inequality or pay. We talked about what jobs we do and how we got there and what we might want to do next. These are deep roots that bode well for the future. It is this spirit and these attitudes that will bring about change.

Yelling and complaining against injustices is worthless if you can't back it up with potential solutions to the problem in the first place. The 'pale, male and stale brigade' is an ugly expression and its use does little to engender a spirit of cooperation. Who wants to listen to

that? If every effort and quarter given results in this kind of petulant backlash, why bother trying at all? In the face of accelerated speed of change in the manufacturing and technology sectors, we need to create an environment where we discuss the many challenges ahead and how we will address them. Gender bias is only one such challenge. These sectors will do themselves irreparable damage if they cannot train and maintain a skilled, flexible and versatile workforce.

**Ceed – the Centre for Engineering Education and Development in Scotland** – has been a great ‘driver’ for upskilling, training and bringing together like-minded businesses to have open dialogue about the wants and needs of our workforce. It is through them that businesses like Exmos can sit down with our peers and respond to the requirements of industry and responsibilities to our workforce now and not leave things to chance for future years.

Our manufacturing sector’s need for engineers far outstrips supply and its future depends on us being able to train and retain the best – regardless of gender. So it’s a good thing that in the second decade of the 21st century, gender imbalance in pay and opportunity is still filling column inches and a fair amount of broadcast airtime. The more we talk about it, the more we insist that things must change, the better. We need innovative thinking about how to address the issues and arguments raised, not just lots of noise about how unfair it is.

I do think we are getting better at redefining gender inequality and my own experience is that there is a marked improvement when it comes to women attaining executive jobs. However, we still need more women in technical and executive positions. After all, we’ve seen great progress in our political parties! Scotland plc has never had a better opportunity to showcase the strength and depth of our manufacturing and engineering professions and quality of people in them – irrespective of gender.

Our schools, colleges and universities are flourishing with nascent manufacturing and engineering talent to help spearhead our future success in technologies such as AI and robotics, which will bring innumerable benefits to our society. I firmly believe that the ‘silo’ thinking of suitable jobs for boys and girls is already being consigned to the past. We need to keep on repeating the message that gender is irrelevant because it is. The ability to manage effectively, do the job diligently and be innovative and pioneering in the mindset is what industry needs. We’ve come a long way to correct gender equality and we have a lot further to go, but we have to work together to ensure that our business leaders are in position on ability alone. Given the challenges we face, the future of our industry depends on it.

**Kirsty McIntosh, Business Development Manager, Exmos Ltd.**



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