

# HVAC&R

# Nation

AN AIRAH PUBLICATION

FEATURE

The R32  
roll-out

## Skills

WORKSHOP

Variable  
head-pressure  
control and  
variable  
inter-stage  
pressure  
control

# Frontline female fridgies

*What's it like to be  
a woman of HVAC&R?*







HVAC&R organisations with greater diversity perform better.

# LEVELLING THE PLAYING FIELD

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The reality is that women have been under-represented in the HVAC&R industry for many years

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Numerous studies have shown that diversity in the workplace can lead to a more successful business. Although the Australian HVAC&R industry is a great example of cultural diversity at work, we lag behind others when it comes to gender diversity. But as **Sean McGowan** reports, this is changing too.

represented in the HVAC&R industry for many years, and this continues today.

Even with the business case for gender diversity clear for at least a decade, the industry has been slow to encourage women to enter it. But change is occurring.

“There is a strong recognition in the engineering sector that it needs to utilise the talents of women who make up half the population, and that by embracing women the performance of the sector and organisations in the sector is dramatically improved,” says Jenny Bailey, leadership coach and author of *Women in Hard Hats*.

Ask yourself how many women you know that work in the HVAC&R industry. Chances are you will know a few – probably in non-technical roles within your organisation, such as administration, marketing, human resources ... upper management perhaps.

Now ask yourself how many of those women are working in a technical role?

Whether you know of one, a couple, or none at all, the reality is that women have been under-

represented in the HVAC&R industry for many years, and this continues today. She says that by electing to only choose men to work in an organisation, the talent pool is immediately reduced to half – and is reduced even further when it comes to recruiting university graduates (women make up more than half of all university graduates).



Jenny Bailey, author of *Women in Hard Hats*.

"It is like picking the Australian cricket team from only Victoria, Queensland and South Australia," Bailey says.

Research has also shown that organisations with a greater diversity simply perform better. Greater diversity in the workplace increases the range of perspectives and ideas available, promotes a more "fair and equitable" workplace and reduces staff turnover.

Having worked as an engineer and as a senior executive for some of world's biggest companies, including KPMG, Rio Tinto, SKM and Yarra Valley Water, Bailey believes that the HVAC&R industry can be attractive to women.

"It is a growing industry, providing practical work that contributes to the wellbeing of the community," she says. "It is also work that is difficult to offshore, making it more future-proof."

However, Bailey says there are obvious obstacles to the industry improving its gender diversity in technical roles.

"It is essential to find an employer sensitive to the needs of women, so that female fridge mechanics feel like they are working in a supportive environment, and that they are not forced to act like men just to fit in."

## THE WOMEN OF AIRAH

Groups such as the Women of AIRAH promote innovation through diversity, and provide support for women to increase their participation in both the Institute, and the wider HVAC&R industry.

"Being a female in a male-dominated environment can be exhausting and lonely," says Bailey. "Groups like Women of AIRAH provide social support and the professional development necessary to navigate what is still an uneven playing field for women."

While you might not know of too many women in technical roles, HVAC&R Nation reached out to Lauren Stacey, Jenny Smith, Ezra Finch and Sophie Decottignies to find out what life on the tools is really like for a woman.

And their response might surprise you.

## Jenny Smith, Affil.AIRAH

Owner

About Airconditioning, Darwin



Jenny Smith has worked in the HVAC&R industry for over 35 years, and currently operates About Airconditioning in Darwin.

After working with many knowledgeable and talented people over that time, Smith was inspired to create customised solutions for clients, products and environments. As well as project management, scheduling and facilities management, she still manages to find time to work on the tools.

"Fridgies are the original Jack and Jill of the trades," Smith says.

Living and breathing the profession as an apprentice, Smith drove her tradesmen crazy "wanting to know everything." Her enthusiasm also garnered the support of her TAFE lecturers and parents.

"I spent my spare time making freezer boxes and contraptions from scratch," she says. "This attitude was the thing that challenged the perception of me, as a woman, being in a totally male-dominated industry. So whether they were supportive or not of me being there initially, they came around when they saw my enthusiasm and motivation to learn."

After completing her apprenticeship, Smith was asked to run the first ever pilot course for women in trades – leading to her completing a Diploma in Education. She also spent a great deal of time teaching Indigenous Australians.

But even as engineering undergoes a gender shift, she says the gender imbalance in HVAC&R trades remains evident today.

"I feel that men are chosen over women in the trades," Smith says. "As to why, I'm not sure but even now when I show up at a customer's home to do a job, the customer is still amazed."

"There are not many female refrigeration and air conditioning tradeswomen out there – perhaps because women don't see the career path as attractive, or see it as less flexible."

For this reason, Smith says trade opportunities should be presented to schools and young women encouraged to seek and discuss HVAC&R pathways and opportunities.

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Fridgies are the original Jack and Jill of the trades

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And she is buoyed by the introduction of groups like the Women of AIRAH, of which she is the Northern Territory's chapter representative.

"TAFE can be a very isolating space for a woman; however, this can keep you focused on your studies and fast-tracked by your teachers. The introduction of the Women of AIRAH group is addressing this, as well as changes in attitudes in the HVAC&R industry, employers and access to more women in aligned trades.

"Attitudes are shifting, and we are learning that gender balance in our workforce is vital to business performance and growth as we become more competitive." ■

WOMEN OF AIRAH  
INNOVATION  
THROUGH  
DIVERSITY



Join AIRAH for the inaugural launch event for the Women of AIRAH (WOA)

The WOA group will develop AIRAH's strategy for supporting women and increasing their participation in both AIRAH and the HVAC&R industry. They will work with local AIRAH divisions to run events, networking sessions and other initiatives.

At this event in Sydney, inspirational speakers from leading Australian HVAC&R, property and consulting companies share their stories about how diversity has given their organisations a competitive edge in the marketplace.

**Date:** September 12

**Time:** 6pm

**Venue:** Doltone House, Darling Island Wharf Pyrmont Point NSW

[www.airah.org.au/events](http://www.airah.org.au/events)



## ■ Ezra Finch

Refrigeration and air conditioning mechanic

Building & Asset Services, Department of Housing and Public Works Queensland



Ezra Finch's entry into the HVAC&R industry came as a mature-aged apprentice.

Choosing woodshop and metal shop classes over home economics at high school, she subsequently completed a Certificate in Engineering and Manufacturing, which became a pathway to her chosen field.

"I loved working with tools – creating and fixing things and problem-solving," Finch says.

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Don't give up. It took me 12 years to secure my apprenticeship – I just never gave up applying for the positions”

Gaining an apprenticeship led to her now working as a refrigeration and air conditioning mechanic for Building & Asset Services under the Department of Housing and Public Works for the Queensland government.

She says she mainly services and maintains government sites in Brisbane, and works on commercial central air conditioning plant, air-handling units, cooling towers, motors, pumps and exhaust systems.

"The job is always changing – never repetitive – and I am always being exposed to different challenges and learning something new every day," Finch says.

Like others, Finch has encountered challenges along the way, but has addressed them like any other – with patience and determination.

She says in-house training has been valuable in learning different building management systems (BMS), commissioning and calibrating sensors and following site-specific processes and procedures.

"My employer has been very supportive," she says. "I've had several mentors across my time to guide and teach me, and ensuring I knew how to complete tasks using various approaches."

Finch believes opportunities exist for women seeking a technical role in the industry, but says that determination is vital.

"You just have to be up for the challenge," she says. "Don't give up. It took me 12 years to secure my apprenticeship – I just never gave up applying for the positions." ■

## ■ Lauren Stacey

Third-year apprentice

BioCool Refrigeration



Lauren Stacey is a third-year apprentice with BioCool Refrigeration in Perth – a business she runs alongside her husband, who is also a refrigeration mechanic.

Winner of the First Year Award as the Most Deserving Apprentice at the annual Western Australian AMCA Industry Awards, Lauren's entry into the industry is somewhat unique – but the challenges of learning the trade remain.

"It actually started as a bit of a joke, when my husband's work load increased and he was discussing putting on an apprentice or sub-contracting work out to another tradesperson," Stacey says.

"I said I would become his apprentice and it just snowballed from there!"

Stacey says she has been fortunate to work on a variety of different systems and equipment, which has given her confidence and allowed her skillset to grow.

"I must say I think I have an advantage," she says. "I have had my own tradie available all day to answer my questions and show me how things work. He has been able to take extra time, and I have had the opportunity to try new things without the time constraints of some businesses."

Stacey loves the variety of her work, and the constant challenges available in the industry.

"On a day-to-day basis, your jobs are often varied, and this keeps things fresh and interesting."

As well as being an administrator of the Refrigeration Workers of Western Australia Facebook page, which connects 2,000 like-minded people, recently she has been introduced to the Women of AIRAH group.

Stacey believes there is a growing trend toward women entering a trade, and notes that many more companies are becoming "equal-opportunity employers".

"I have had both positive and negative feedback across my time, but the negative feedback has come more from surprise, as it's not common to see women in the trade," Stacey says.

"But in saying that, I have had so much positive feedback from clients to suppliers through to my TAFE lecturers, who have been more than willing to teach me and treat me the same as anyone else." ■

## ■ Sophie Decottignies

Energy services contract administrator

Veolia Australia and New Zealand

Sophie Decottignies has worked in the air conditioning and refrigeration industry for 27 years – firstly in her native France, and later in Perth after migrating to Australia on a skilled work visa.

But two years ago, after being injured at work, she was forced to leave her role as a field technician and take up an office position.

"I really loved my job, mainly because of its diversity – it was never boring and you are always challenged with new things," Decottignies says.

Decottignies was attracted to the industry after hearing about the career of her cousin, a fridgie in the French army. She began her studies at age 16, and was the first and only girl to apply for the diploma at the time.

"One of the teachers told me that one of the reasons they accepted my application was to see whether a girl could do the job," she says. "I took that as a challenge and ended up becoming passionate about it."

Soon after, she gained her first job working on commercial refrigeration and air conditioning systems operating on ammonia, CO<sub>2</sub> and HCFCs, as well as cooling towers, air compressors, and other systems.

"My first employer chose me because his son was a ballet dancer," Decottignies says. "He thought it was only fair to also give me a chance to work in the male world."

Although many employers were supportive and encouraging of Decottignies' place in the industry, just as many challenged her position.

"When I was 26 years old, I wanted the same status as the other fridgie in my team," she says. "However, I was told by my senior management that they couldn't, as I was too young and a woman – even though I was doing the same work as the men. It was a year later that they finally gave me the same status."

Today, Decottignies works as a contracts administrator for energy company Veolia, where she combines her knowledge as a technician and administrator.

She says despite opportunities being out there for women in the trade, they are often dependent on how the employer or management view women and their capabilities.

"Even though I believe gender-related issues are slowly decreasing, there is still a lot of work to do – particularly at a young age in the education system – to further reduce the problem," Decottignies says.

"But a career in HVAC&R can be very rich, stimulating and challenging, and open a lot of opportunities due to its diversity. So go for it and be prepared to be successful!" ■