



**Sarah Lewin: 'equilibrium in the near future'.**

WE HAVE BECOME USED TO SEEING NEWS stories on the lack of women in IT with the general consensus being that on average only 17 per cent of IT workers are female). Yet, at the Esri UK User Conference, it was almost double that. In fact, drilling down further into the list of attendees shows that almost half (45 per cent) of GIS Analysts and just over half (52 per cent) of GIS Technicians were female.

**At a tipping point** More interesting perhaps is that this trend is expected to continue as the next generation of GIS workers graduate into full time employment. Some 64 per cent of the 98 GIS students in attendance were female; meaning that gender neutrality may even go past equilibrium in the near future.

GIS is taking up the reins and providing a blueprint for success. GIS is now on the national curriculum and through the investments we are making into Esri UK's CSR initiative, GIS technology is now being used in some 140 universities across the UK on a range of courses including architecture, biology and geography. The amount of students being exposed to what can be accomplished with GIS is increasing month by month and is why so many graduates of each gender are coming up through the ranks of education establishments interested in exploring a career in the sector.

Whilst we won't truly break the glass ceiling for some time yet it is encouraging to see that, over the past five years, half of those joining our graduate programme have been female; so the move towards a balance has begun.

## GIS: the Blueprint towards gender neutrality in IT

London recently played host to over 3,000 GIS professionals. What made it different from many other IT events was the large proportion of female industry experts in attendance, making it arguably, says **Sarah Lewin** head of pre-sales and tech research at Esri UK, the most gender-neutral IT event the industry has ever seen.

The reasons behind the trend are open to conjecture. Some point to the fact that, by its very nature, the GIS industry doesn't employ traditional geeky techie people but rather leans towards mathematicians and geographers.

**Breaking up the old boys' club** I think what is also making GIS so appealing to both sexes is that the technology is intuitive and can be applied to so many different industries. As such, GIS is an ideal route into the wider technology arena; as a data scientist said about the GIS industry: "it is a way to break into the old boys' club".

When I studied my GIS master's degree at Edinburgh University some 16 years ago, less than a third of students on the course were girls. On beginning my career I found that it was equally male dominated, though as the User Conference showed, it is far more balanced today. But there is more progress to be made before we see a more gender neutral senior management line-up in the boardroom, as it is still stilted towards the top. I'm hopeful that the trend we are seeing from graduates will address this balance in the coming years.

**Looking to the future** It is heartening to see so many initiatives now looking to get children as young as five into coding from an early age. Without such a paradigm shift there is an impending skills gap on the horizon, not just in technology but in other industries such as engineering, which won't be filled by men, so the focus needs to widen.

### From the Frontline Isabel Allen, GIS manager at Crossrail 2

I used to be a big fan of Channel 4's Time Team, where in each episode the specialists carrying out an archaeological dig used various survey technologies and maps, although at the time I didn't realise it was being powered by GIS.

After studying geography and business management at University College of London and becoming exposed to GIS technology, I transferred to a specialised GIS course at the University of Portsmouth. Being dyslexic, I loved the visual element to GIS, and became fascinated by the various applications of the technology. After graduating, I got a GIS job at Transport for London, maintaining the property asset register. Since then, I have moved to head up the GIS team for Crossrail 2 and am currently creating a consultation map through ArcGIS Online for the next round of consultation.

I believe that GIS has a high proportion of females because of the visual element of the technology. Women are generally good at taking the more techie aspects of GIS and distilling it down, acting as a bridge between the techies and the technophobes within the business.

Women in general are exploring a wider range of roles than ever before, with GIS undoubtedly leading the way. At the Esri UK conference earlier this year, I found it really inspiring to attend so many talks and demos from females at the forefront of the GIS marketplace. My hope would be to see these talks being done in schools to encourage the next generation of young women.

“

**It is heartening to see so many initiatives now looking to get children as young as five into coding...**

”