

Women fight uphill battle in HVACR.(heating, cooling, air conditioning, contractor)

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Ruth King believes it is easier for women to join the HVACR ranks today because women are, as she put it, "more accepted" in nontraditional roles in this day and age.

"My 17-year-old daughter thinks she can do anything she wants--and, she can," said the long-time industry consultant and speaker. "She'll never have to face the tough discrimination that we faced getting into these fields."

That said--and even though there continues to be an increase of women joining the American workforce each year--this does not mean that females are coming out in droves to join the respective contractor, wholesale/ distribution, and/or manufacturer sector of the HVACR industry. The U.S. Department of Labor terms nontraditional occupations for women as "any job in which women comprise 25 percent or less of the total employed"--and HVACR fits that description.

Though exact statistics are hard to come by regarding how many women are in all areas of this industry, *Women in the Labor Force: A Databook*, published last May by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, reported that only 1.5 percent of the approximate 351,000 listed heating, air conditioning, and refrigeration mechanics and installers are women. The numbers are also small in construction and extraction occupations (2.5 percent of the 8.5 million-plus in the field), sheet metal workers (4 percent of the 152,000 total), and "maintenance and repair workers, general" (4.1 percent of 300,000 total).

While it's true that women may have come a long way in this industry, women currently in the field believe there are a ton of changes that still have to happen for the numbers to increase. "Most women end up in our industry just like I did--through birth, marriage, or accident," said Ann Kahn, owner of Kahn Mechanical, Dallas. "I have no idea how to attract more women to this work any more than I know how to attract more men into air conditioning. When you find the answer, let me know."

PUSHING AHEAD

From the contracting business side of HVACR, Kahn is one of very few women contractor owners. In 2000, she bought out her ex-husband's interest in Kahn Mechanical and has been in

the top slot ever since. She oversees 22 administrative, service, and installation employees. The company's annual sales are in the \$3 million range.

"I have never felt that being a woman owner is any different than being any other kind of owner," said Kahn. "I face the same problems each day as anyone in any business and have encountered few, to no, problems being accepted in the air conditioning or general business communities. The few times I've ran into anyone who doubted my capabilities, I've considered it their problem, not mine.

"Maybe I'm oblivious, but I feel if you treat everyone you meet with respect, you will receive respect in return. Respect for the individual is one of the basic values of Kahn Mechanical, by the way."

Kelly Bryson believes in that motto, too. Here is a woman that, 31 years ago, started out as an administrative assistant for eight project managers and engineers in the operations department at Berg Mechanical, and is now vice president of the 77-year-old mechanical company based out of Shreveport, La.

"When I began in this industry, there were few women outside the standard clerical positions," said Bryson, who did take an active approach in moving up the business ladder. "I was intensely interested in learning all I could about the plumbing and air conditioning business. I read everything I could get my hands on about project management and how to run a successful job. I met and visited with the engineers and general contractors we worked with.

"I pushed hard to be allowed to take my career to the next step beyond clerical work, but once I proved that I could be an effective estimator, subsequent steps leading to my current role were met with little or no resistance."

It didn't hurt that Bryson produced solid results. Within months of stepping into the No. 2 position in the company's service department, the service manager resigned and Bryson's boss agreed to give her a shot at the vacant position.

"At that time, revenues in Shreveport service were approximately \$1 million per year. Berg's Lafayette, La., service department was an independent operation, with a separate manager, doing approximately \$800,000 per year," remembered Bryson. "At that time, a lively competition between both service offices existed, with each office working to achieve better financial results than the other. Both offices operated with different methodologies, basically no internal communication, and a lack of synergy."

After a year or two of enduring this situation, Bryson approached management with the idea of combining both service departments under her leadership. After outlining the many benefits a united service division could provide the company, she was named vice president and began to undertake steps to reorganize the two separate groups into "one, synergistic business unit." Since that time, Berg's Service Division has grown from \$1.8 million in revenue to \$18 million in 2005. Service satellites exist in Lake Charles, Alexandria, and Baton Rouge, with a regional office in New Orleans.

"I believe there are decided advantages to being a woman business owner in our industry today," offered Bryson. "I find that it is easy to relate to employees from an emphatic, female perspective. Women are persuasive and, generally, have the strong interpersonal and people skills that are essential in managing today's employee base. The same skill set serves us well in dealing with building owners, contractors, engineers, and architects."

In her estimation, the perception that contracting remains primarily a male-dominated industry keeps many women from considering the HVACR industry as a career.

"There is no easy solution for getting more women into our field," she said. "A comprehensive plan, including marketing and incentives, will be required if we are to be successful in this initiative."

It is Bryson's belief that national associations, in conjunction with the United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters (UA), must specifically target women and their parents at the high school level and/or younger.

"We can offer incentives such as the 30 hours of college credit applied toward an associate's degree in construction supervision, which qualified UA members earn upon passing the fifth year final exam," she suggested.

MORE NEEDS TO BE DONE

Like Kahn, Laura DiFilippo "married" into HVACR contracting. She is currently CEO for DiFilippo's Service Co., which is owned by her husband, Vince DiFilippo. In her case, DiFilippo began working for the Paoli, Pa.-based residential firm in 1992 as a part-time bookkeeper.

"I came to the position I hold today due to two things--growth and need at the company to have an individual watch and manage the daily operations of the organization and my own desire to turn what could have been just a job into a career," said DiFilippo.

She is quick to point out that she entered "as an equal, not just the boss' wife."

"And because of that, I have always assumed that others would treat me the same," she said. "This idealism became part of who DiFilippo's Service is and is reflected in not only the way I am treated, but how all women who work there are treated. Most of the businesses we deal with have always seen me as a decision maker--and those who initially may not have, I worked to win over."

Over the years, DiFilippo said her biggest challenge is finding a balance between work and family.

"Trying to be the very best at my job and the very best mom every day is hard. But, the payoff in both is extremely rewarding. My own balance was found when I realized that work will always be there, but when the kids need you, they need you. By putting them first, I have actually

become better at my job by managing my time properly, learning to be flexible, and knowing that by having a career that I love and work hard at is a great lesson for them to learn."

Again, DiFilippo had to work at it, being a woman in a male-dominated field.

"Have there been times when I've felt that I wasn't being taken seriously because I was a woman?" asked DiFilippo, before answering her own question. "Absolutely. I have walked trade show floors looking for new ideas, only to be completely ignored by vendors who assume I'm not their customer.

"I have attended meetings where people don't know me who assume I am the chapter executive, not the president. And though this can be frustrating, I look at it as a challenge for me to educate and enlighten people in a different way of thinking about our industry that the face of HVACR is changing."

PLANNING IS IMPORTANT

Like Kahn and DiFilippo, Barbara Keil also was "born" into the industry. She is a third generation owner of Keil Heating and Air Conditioning, Riverdale, N.J. She learned the business from the basement up--literally.

"The basement was where our inventory was stored," Keil explained. "When I came to work full time, I started down in the basement, learning the inventory. I then did service and dispatching. My dad gave me the opportunity to literally learn the business from the ground up."

When she started, she was aware that some of the male employees looked at her, as she put it, as "the boss' daughter."

"But by being able to 'talk the talk'--understanding what the customer wanted if they called in for parts or needed help--I believe I have earned their respect," she said. "And while my technical knowledge is weak--and we have an operations manager that excels there--I try not to let them see me sweat. My biggest obstacles over the years have not been from our employees, but from customers, both men and women, who want to speak to a man. That, however, seems to be changing in the last few years."

If a woman is looking to join the contracting ranks, Keil's best advice is simple: "Know your stuff."

"I have found it easier to earn respect from our field guys if I have the knowledge to back it up," she explained. "The best thing I have done for myself and my business is to understand my weaknesses and then hire people who are strong in those areas where I may be weak."

In her estimation, women bring the gift of planning to this industry. "Dotting the I's and crossing the T's ... it's called paying attention to details," she said. "One of the best pieces of advice I received in college was the quote; 'Most people don't plan to fail, they fail to plan.'"

A SLOW PROCESS

Meanwhile, DiFilippo recommended that a woman should consider finding a company with the right culture that not only accepts her as a woman, but as an equal.

"This philosophy needs to be professed from their immediate supervisor, all the way up to the owner," she said. "If the company doesn't fully believe in you, then how can you expect the people they do business with to believe?"

Like her female cohorts, DiFilippo believes women bring different attributes to this industry.

"In my own job, I bring the exact opposite of what my husband brings, which gives our business better balance," she said. "Without generalizing, women can bring a softer side to this industry with empathy, mothering, and flexibility.

"In the residential arena, more and more decisions by our customers are being made by women and we bring a better understanding of communicating and marketing to this individual. For us, I think the greatest thing I have brought to DiFilippo's Service is a better communication system and the cultivation of a team environment."

To bring more women aboard, the industry will just have to provide more education, she said.

"Women don't know what a very lucrative career can be had," said DiFilippo. "We have to get the word out that our doors--and, our minds--are open and that this industry is a viable option for anyone who wants in. As contractors, we need to look outside the box when hiring and consider all candidates. As an industry, we have to create ways to attract women to HVACR as a career option. Contractors need to realize that as the current work force dwindles and we look for new opportunities within minorities, that women need to be on that list."

Admittedly, DiFilippo said this might be a slow process, due mainly to the fact contracting has been a male-driven industry for far too many years.

"We will have to be patient and persistent," she said. "When I first got involved in this industry, you could count the amount of women in the room on one hand. Since then, the numbers at conferences and classes have grown immensely. There are more women in the technician field than ever before. There are daughters taking over running their father's company. There are more women speakers training contractors. There are more women organization leaders today.

"Do I think we have more to do? Tons. But, by working side-by-side with men, we will continue to open this industry to expand and include not only a large female workforce, but a large minority workforce."

whvacr helping women

In September 2003, a group of women and men from all areas of the industry met at the Comfortech conference for the first meeting of a new organization called Women in HVACR

(WHVACR). In addition to the education and networking opportunities, those who attended were invited to sit in on a brainstorming session to help plan the organization's direction.

At the conclusion of that meeting, the board had its mission: to network, educate, and promote the role of women in HVACR, with quality leadership and professionalism, in the industry of the future.

Thanks to networking, WHVACR gained the support of many industry organizations, including International Service Leadership (ISL), Excellence Alliance (EAI), the Mechanical Contractors Association of America (MCAA), North American Technician Excellence (NATE), Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors--National Association (PHCC), and Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors National Association (SMACNA).

To fulfill its education and promotional missions, the association has:

- * Held several online educational programs on HVAC-Channel.tv, courtesy of the first WHVACR president Ruth King. These sessions are designed to encourage interaction and allow members to "pick the brains" of industry experts.
- * Developed a Website, hosted by Online-Access. It is designed to serve as a clearinghouse for information on membership, upcoming events, news, and sponsorship opportunities. It also provides links to supporting industry organizations and provides a way to contact board and committee members of WHVACR.
- * Circulated a periodic e-mail newsletter to keep members informed. The newsletter focuses on upcoming programs, helps members network by sharing in each other's successes, fields requests for assistance, and includes a calendar of industry events.
- * Assisted schools and universities by providing potential speakers for career days. WHVACR holds an annual conference each September. "It has been thrilling to watch an organization that was the dream of a few women grow to more than 230 members from all facets of the industry, including commercial and residential contracting, manufacturing, supply houses, consultants, trainers, associations, and publishing," said current WHVACR president Adrienne Breedlove.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON WHVACR ...

Visit www.womeninhvacr.org .

a woman's perspective

Like other women in the industry, Leslye Sandberg did not foresee having a career in HVACR, much less becoming owner of Permatron, a manufacturer of standard and custom air filter products.

"The business was owned by my father, Roy Sandberg. I agreed to help out while he resolved some health issues and ended up growing and buying the company from him," she explained.

Sandberg, who has been involved in manufacturing for 20 years now, has seen productive changes in both the work and industry environment.

"I can remember answering the telephone in 1986 and the customer on the phone was an installer. He wanted to talk to 'one of the guys,'" said Sandberg. "I jokingly replied that I was one of the guys and they could talk to me. This would simply net me, 'Really, I want to talk to a guy who can help me.' So, I'd just give the phone to my dad and let him answer the same thing I would have.

"Nowadays, professionals from all areas of the industry are just that: professionals. They respond to those that are willing and able to offer solutions and assistance, and that's what we do at Permatron."

While some women have experienced resistance from this industry, Sandberg believes being part of a female minority is a plus because "it's easier to get attention."

"That said, you'd best be very, very prepared to state your case or make your product offering because the bar has historically been higher for the 'gal' making the sales call," she warned. "In a male-dominated industry, you are more likely to find customers that automatically invest product knowledge in other men, yet are skeptical that a woman might have the same or better product knowledge.

"You only get the chance to make a first impression one time. After that, you'd better be standing on merit, whether you are male or female."

For women who may have a desire to join the HVACR manufacturing field, Sandberg recommended getting the broadest education or learning experience you can.

"Don't limit yourself to one niche within your firm. Learn as much about operations as you can," she advised. "It's a great way to advance and it's the only way to really understand what your firm's strategic advantages are in the marketplace."

Thinking for a moment, she added, "I'm not so sure that this is just about women, but most of the ones I know in technical or process industries tend to be very curious and very interested in expanding their personal experience and skills base. There is an old adage about having 20 years of experience on the job--as opposed to one year of experience repeated 20 times. You have to keep growing."

In Sandberg's estimation, if more women are to join the manufacturing sector, the industry will have to reach out more.

"I think little is known about what is available in manufacturing--not just in this industry, but in many others as well," she said. "Glamour stories just aren't told about factory lines and how they came into being. Process industries offer great opportunity for skills growth and, on top of that, it can be great fun.

"Those who get satisfaction out of actually making things, solving a problem, or improving a process can really get their teeth into manufacturing operations. I think more women are coming up in the manufacturing arena, but it will just take some time."

women vie for respect

Christine Nardini does not understand why there are not more women in the wholesale and/or distributor side of HVACR. The president of American Metals Supply, Fenton, Mo., believes this business is "not different than most businesses, in terms of obstacles."

"I initially was going to say it is missing some of the glamour of other careers, but I don't think that's it," said Nardini, whose grandfather started the galvanized sheet, coils, pipes, and fittings supply house in 1963. "Women become scientists and engineers and that isn't necessarily glamorous."

Thinking for a minute more, she added, "There are definitely fewer women in this industry than other industries, probably due to the fact that the nuts and bolts of heating and air conditioning isn't generally something that naturally attracts women."

Nardini, who joined the company 10 years ago after working in public accounting for six years, said she enjoys the business aspect of running a business and has come to enjoy learning more about the technical aspects of this trade. "I could always improve in learning more of the nuts and bolts," she admitted, but noted that her lack of knowledge can be a plus. "Sometimes being a woman can open a door for you. Being an oddity sometimes makes people curious as to how much knowledge you do have and what you have to say."

Still, like most women, Nardini was not thinking of making HVACR her original career path.

"I don't think you could have convinced me coming out of college that I would be excited to go to work each day at a sheet metal wholesale company," she admitted. "It may be the distribution industry doesn't promote itself enough for the challenging and exciting careers it can provide. It seems to be a well-kept secret."

Like Nardini, Mollie Boles did not necessarily jump at the chance of joining the family supply business--Boles Supply, Fayetteville, N.C. Established by Charles A. Boles in 1982, it has grown from two to 22 employees, and produced sales of \$11 million-plus last year.

"It took about six years for my husband to convince me that I should be working with the family," confessed Boles, who is now a company vice president. "It's very difficult. Most women are labeled for certain jobs and not one is in the HVACR field. Men did not want to deal with me in the beginning and would tell me accordingly."

It took some intestinal fortitude for Boles to fit in. It's one reason why she believes women shy away from this industry. "It's male dominated and this can intimidate some women," she said. "The drawbacks are that it is more difficult for a woman to get the education needed to work in

the field. You have to have a special interest or a special person who really wants to teach you the ins and outs."

Boles did pass along some advice. "If you are a woman in the HVACR field, be prepared to work twice as hard for the respect," she said. "Men just don't want to get this type of information from a woman. They want to hear it coming from a man."

Early into her new career, Boles remembered a somewhat belligerent male, who told her point blank that he did not need a woman's help.

"I immediately found the first male employee I came upon and put this employee in front of this customer," she recalled. "The customer asked the male employee a question, that male employee would then ask me, and then he would relay my answer to this male customer.

"It didn't take long for the customer to realize who had the knowledge. And the next time he came in the store, he did ask for me."

Being in the business for several years now, Boles admitted life in the wholesale-distributorship field has improved. "When I worked the counter, I can't say that I didn't get treated as an equal, but some customers just did not want me to help them with their purchases," she said. "Today, lots of women have found their place in this industry. Women are out making duct work, installing full systems, and working at the counters in wholesale houses across the country."

Still, the pace of women joining the industry is slow, in her opinion. "Women sometimes can look at things differently than a man," she said. "Women are more detail-oriented and are better at holding folks accountable."

Nardini echoed that sentiment. "Women come with a different and new perspective ... fresh ideas," she said.

Even though both women were not necessarily eager to get into the field, both have no regrets.

"I wouldn't trade my career for any other," said Nardini. "Helping make a business run is a challenge that is exciting and rewarding."

In truth, with desire and ambition, Nardini said one can succeed in any field.

"Educate yourself. Know your product," advised Boles.

By Mark Skaer

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