

Unconscious bias is the main challenge

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“We have been changing as an organisation. About 40 percent of our recent hires have been female, including women in areas such as technology, risk, and in our legal team. It appears to be an ongoing issue that there are still fewer women in electrical engineering but on the IT side we are seeing more coming through,” says Simon Mackenzie, CEO of Auckland-based energy company, Vector.

The organisation employs almost 800 staff, and while the overall split is still more weighted to men, Vector is beginning to see more women represented across all facets of the business.

Vector has an overall gender pay gap of about 12 percent – the New Zealand average “Personally, I think it is fundamentally wrong that there should be any gender pay gap. It’s particularly important if you have a diverse workforce as we do. You have to be transparent about pay equity because you can’t retain people if they are not being rewarded equally for their skills,” says Simon.

The company has been working on closing the gap, conducting a pay equity audit, setting aside budget annually to review and address pay equity issues and for funding for one-off payments available for career development. Vector also recently introduced a women in leadership programme to strengthen the female leadership pipeline - which has been very popular.

“We have had some quite moving stories where women have realised a potential they never thought possible. Women, who may not have had the self confidence initially, have become leaders and developed into great role models, not only here but in the community,” says Simon.

By the nature of the work, flexibility is an option for some, but not all employees.

“We have a 24/7 operation here and some roles do require people to be on site. But by and large it’s up to managers to work out how staff can work more flexibly. Those with young families or carers responsibilities, for instance, have working from home and flexibility options.”

He says that staff on parental leave are not disadvantaged in remuneration reviews, and should not feel that taking parental leave limits opportunities nor impacts salary progression.

“We have a return to work reintegration programme after parental leave to make sure people re-enter the work force in a smart way that retains some balance,” he says.

In 2015 Vector won the Diversity Works Supreme Award for its work in diversity and inclusion. The programme not only has strong support from company leadership but also

from grassroots level with staff involved in diversity and inclusion committees. The work is ongoing, particularly in addressing unconscious bias.

“For me unconscious bias is the main challenge – addressing it starts with looking in the mirror and realising that you have it whether you are aware of it or not.”

At Vector, it is mandatory for all managers to undertake training so they are aware of their own unconscious bias.

“We aim for our workforce composition to reflect our community and are very culturally diverse, with about 28 different ethnicities in our workforce, so it is as much about ethnicity as gender. Sometimes people do need to be called out and it’s important to ensure we have a culture and environment that supports challenges against any kind of bias.”

Simon has spent most of his career in the power industry, and is passionate about diversity as a business imperative.

“I think people need to wake up that diversity is fundamentally critical for problem solving. At Vector, we use the United Nations 17 sustainable development goals as a lens to look at our business – that includes gender equality, decent work and economic growth, sustainable cities and communities amongst other things. Some companies still look at their businesses in a very traditional, single dimension view, focusing purely on half-yearly results... they really won’t have any results to focus on if they don’t take a wider view.”

