

# Helping hands for women at work

## *Several recent initiatives strive to boost career development*

By Sarah Dobson  
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**HAVING BEEN** with Rubin Thomlinson in Toronto for six months, lawyer Hena Singh was keen to build her practice in employment law so the firm's partners recommended she take a course in November — Bright Beginnings at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management.

The two-day interactive program is designed to give up-and-coming female professionals the tools they need to understand themselves, influence others and build networks critical to success in the workplace.

"Most of the women really wanted to hone in on their strengths and achievements and wanted to be able to learn how to use those to their advantage, and to also counter our weaknesses," said Singh.

Bright Beginnings features components on personal branding, persuasion, emotional intelligence and networking.

"They were all really relevant to the kind of development that I was looking for," she said.

The initiative is one of several that has launched recently with a concentration on boosting the presence of women in the workforce, including the Canadian Board Diversity Council, a venture aiming to increase the percentage of corporate board seats held by women, and a Women in Technology forum by the Canadian Advanced Technology Alliance.

"Women have different goals and different focuses and a program that really centres on women allows women to speak freely, for one, and allows the program developers to address those issues head-on," said Singh. "There are women issues that should be addressed separate to men."

There are a number of tactics that help propel careers, such as building relationships, becoming visible, being able to articulate and lobby for yourself, communicating effectively, finding mentors and coaches and developing a good career plan with specific goals, said Geeta Sheker, director of the Initiative for Women in Business at Rotman, which hopes to run Bright Beginnings twice a year.

"Many times it will be subtleties of what you don't know that can hold you back," she said. "Women, quite often we find, when they're early in their careers, think that the most qualified person will be promoted or if they are technically competent, they're able to advance, but quite often advancing in today's business world is as much about learning and playing by the rules as it is about talent and results."

While much of this can apply to both genders, there are not enough women in senior positions, in the pipeline, who are role models for women early in their careers — despite the compelling business case, said Sheker.

### **Increasing the number of women on boards**

The business side of the equation is also being touted by the Jeffery Group, which has launched a Canadian Board Diversity Council (CBDC) to increase the percentage of *Financial Post* 500 corporate board seats held by women to 20 per cent over four years. In 2007, women held 13 per cent of seats in the *FP* 500, according to a Catalyst study, an increase of one percentage point since the previous study in 2005.

Thirty-five founding-member companies that include Canada Post, Suncor Energy, Simon Fraser University and Ford are involved in the initiative. The CBDC launched in November, in partnership with the Vancouver group Women on Board — which also ran its second annual forum focused on advancing women to senior leadership — by bringing together corporate directors and women considered board-ready.

“We put them all in the same room,” said Pamela Jeffery, president and CEO of the Jeffery Group in Toronto, calling it a practical approach because a common argument from organizations as to why they don’t hire more female board members is search firms don’t present slates that include women or it’s difficult to find women who are interested.

The CBDC is also meeting with directors to present the business case for board diversity, along with an action plan for boards to improve their diversity record. Feedback from the sessions will, hopefully, make for a compelling presentation to *FP* 500 organizations.

“On the supply side, there are more and more women who are now qualified and asking, ‘Well, what about me?’ and, on the demand side, more and more companies are coming to the realization diversity makes good business sense,” she said.

The group has also started pilot workshops — in Toronto, Calgary, Vancouver and Montreal — with executive search firm Korn/Ferry International to provide women with the tools needed to attain board positions, by giving them an understanding of how decisions are made and how to make a personal action plan.

“These are steps that need to be taken if you are serious about improving your prospects of being considered for a board,” said Jeffery.

### **The technology sector**

Diversity is also sorely needed in the tech sector, as evidenced by a project from the Canadian Advanced Technology Alliance (CATA). The Women in Technology (WIT) initiative is focusing on the recruitment, retention and advancement of women in information communications technology, biotechnology, energy, aerospace and defence.

The initiative involves the development of the social media website [www.bringiton.ca](http://www.bringiton.ca) — directed at women aged 16 to 26 — professional development

workshops in Montreal, Toronto, Ottawa and Vancouver, webinars and a comprehensive study of best practices for employers.

The latter was created by Wendy Cukier, founder of the Diversity Institute at Ryerson University in Toronto, after consultations with more than 300 workers in the technology sector across Canada. While the industry offers women interesting and meaningful work, good compensation and opportunities for growth, there are barriers — a male-dominated environment, heavy workloads with little work-life balance and tremendous pressure to stay current, making parental leaves difficult, found *Attracting, Retaining and Promoting Women: Best Practices in the Canadian Tech Sector*.

When asked to rank the top five barriers to advancement in the workplace, lack of self-promotion was a top-five concern. But the old boys' network was a bigger problem for women (46 per cent) compared to men (36 per cent), as was a lack of understanding of the hidden rules (36 versus 18 per cent), not having an influential mentor or sponsor (36 versus 11 per cent), lack of development opportunities (35 versus 25 per cent) and child-care or family obligations (26 versus 14 per cent).

The situation is considered a “shrinking, leaky pipeline,” with fewer women coming into the field and more women leaving, said Joanne Stanley, managing director of CATA WIT.

“It’s not overt discrimination but just the whole environment, the whole culture, is not conducive for women, coupled with that a sense of isolation because there are so few women, lack of understanding the career path, what are the advancement opportunities and that’s all tied up with the boys and the boys’ network and they support each other.”

## **TIPS FOR EMPLOYERS**

HR checklist for diversity

How an organization can boost diversity and help women climb the corporate ladder.

### **Recruitment**

- Does the organization consider alternative pathways to positions?
- Do recruiters specifically target women and other under-represented groups?
- Do all internship, co-op and placement programs have diversity targets?
- Are selection committees representative?
- Are bias-free interviewing processes used?

### **Performance management**

- Is accountability for diversity targets built into performance management systems?

### **Promotion**

- Does succession planning take into account diversity targets?

- Are high-potential females (and other under-represented groups) given opportunities to take “stretch” assignments?
- Are promotional opportunities and processes communicated openly and clearly to employees?
- Are high-potential female employees given access to specialized training and professional development?

### **Retention policies**

- Is diversity tracked in employee separations (retirements, dismissals, voluntary exits, layoffs)?
- Are exit interviews conducted and the results acted upon?

### **Training and development**

- Does orientation for new employees address diversity?
- Do all employees and managers receive mandatory training on diversity?
- Do individuals involved in hiring receive specialized training in diversity and bias-free hiring?
- Are female-centric management skills development programs available?
- Are provisions available for keeping employees current during or after parental leave?
- Are customized management development programs available for high-potential employees?
- Are formal mentoring or coaching programs (internal or external) provided?
- Are formal women’s networks supported?

### **Work-life balance**

- Are family-friendly policies in place?

Source: Attracting, Retaining and Promoting Women: Best Practices in the Canadian Tech Sector