

Unfinished Business

**11 Voices of Success
at VicRoads**

Norah Breekveldt

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To all the men and women at
VicRoads dedicated to creating
a fair, diverse and inclusive
organisation.

JUDITH PETTITT

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Acknowledgements

There are some very special people who contributed to making this book happen and I would like to take a moment to say ‘thank you’.

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Finally, to all the readers of this book – may the stories and lessons from these inspiring people continue to guide you on your career journey.

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Preface

'I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood.' Audre Lorde, African American writer, feminist and activist

Unfinished Business contains the memoirs of eleven courageous and inspiring people, who are all at the top of their game at VicRoads. They are courageous because they publicly share some very personal stories about their own hardships and struggles. Their memoirs are inspiring because they fire our imagination and help shift our thinking to new possibilities.

These people don't consider themselves heroes, and they don't see their lives or circumstances as extraordinary. Yet each one has a staggering narrative of persistence, resilience and battling against the odds. These stories matter. They give women hope that there is a way through their own difficulties and challenges – that they too can achieve a truly inspiring and rewarding career whilst successfully combining their work and their personal lives. These people have true power and wisdom.

The memoirs are not complete stories or comprehensive biographies of each of their lives. There are so many experiences that form and shape us that it is impossible to do their complete stories justice. Instead, they are recollections of events, some significant and others

seemingly trivial at the time. They describe moments of true meaning and identify turning points that shaped their futures. Many of their messages are as true for men as women, because men too miss out when work and life commitments are out of balance.

Each memoir reflects and adds to the beauty of the others. It is the hope of our subjects that their experiences take the case for change from people's heads to their hearts – that they will shift the organisation's ideas of what is possible and move people to strive even harder to achieve their goals.

Introduction

Australian society has always prided itself on having a go, practicing fair play and being an egalitarian society where opportunities exist for anyone to succeed and excel.

Yet despite decades of effort towards making women equal to men in the workplace, women continue to be denied opportunities and are still a long way off from being considered equal. Although we can point to modest improvements, women remain under-represented at every transition point, with the disparity greatest at senior levels of leadership. And even where programs are in place to help women balance work and family, many think twice about utilising these programs, concerned that using them will negatively affect their careers.

The case for diversity in business has been convincingly argued over several decades and is really not in doubt anymore. When it comes to gender diversity, performance improves when more women lead – firms with more women in top management are more profitable and companies with gender diversity have more revenue, customers, market share and profits.

Gender equality is good for the economy too. The Grattan Institute found that if Australian women did as much paid work as women in Canada – which would mean an extra six per cent of women in

the workforce – our gross domestic product would be boosted by \$25 billion.*

There is abundant evidence that when mothers return to work it is good for families, as well as society. A National Bureau of Economic Research (USA) study published in 2013[†] found that daughters of working mothers are more likely to be employed, hold supervisory positions and earn more money than the daughters of mothers who don't work outside the home. Sons of working women are also more likely to spend time caring for family members and doing household chores than are the sons of stay-at-home mothers.

Initiatives to eliminate gender bias, such as parental leave policies and workplace flexibility, are good for men too. Research by Samone McCurdy from Monash University found that 80 per cent of fathers would like to be the primary carer of their child but only 2 per cent have actually done so.[‡] Men also experience a double whammy when it comes to gender stereotyping: society discourages them from being the primary caregiver and, as they are often the primary breadwinner, there are higher financial penalties if they take time off work. Perhaps by experiencing the difficulties women have faced for decades, men can join the chorus and demand their share of flexible working practices, alongside mothers.

VicRoads has been on its own journey of discovery regarding creating a culture of diversity and inclusion.

The CEO, John Merritt, came to VicRoads from the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) in 2014. He says he felt warmly welcomed and accepted from the start, despite coming from a non-engineering background.

* Daley, *Game-changers: Economic reform priorities for Australia* (Grattan Institute, 2012).

† Dunifon, Toft Hansen, Nicholson, Palmhøj Nielsen, *The Effect of Maternal Employment on Children's Academic Performance* (National Bureau of Economic Research, USA, 2013).

‡ Breekveldt, *Career Interrupted – How 14 Successful Women Navigate Career Breaks* (Melbourne Books, 2015). McCurdy wrote the chapter “‘You Did What?’ Taking the Daddy Track’.

His first impressions, however, were of an outdated government organisation that had, in part, lost its way and become inward-looking. It was a masculine culture, led by dominant, competent and respected men for long periods of time. Paternalistic and autocratic in equal measure, decision-making percolated to the top and then, once made, decisions cascaded down to an obedient and deferential workforce.

An over-reliance on technical engineering expertise rather than leadership excellence perpetuated a culture that was rigidly bound and conformist. John describes it as having ‘an insidious, seeping impact of significantly undermining the confidence of very capable, impressive people and eroding their resilience so that they struggle to cope with change’.

VicRoads’ traditionalist psyche was on show every day, said John, but it was most obvious in its lack of diversity. Like most organisations, VicRoads recruited in its own image, middle-aged, grey-haired men coincidentally hired people who looked and acted just like them, says John:

It’s just stark, to sit around a leadership table of all men, to have fifty-five male executives and only a handful of women. To have a situation where in twenty years of outstanding graduate intakes, not one of those women has ever made it to the executive ranks. It’s something you would find in a museum. Nothing says more about our datedness than our lack of diversity.

Change has arrived like a high-speed freight train. No longer inward-looking and technical, VicRoads is now judged on the customer experience. Displaying empathy and practising acts of boldness and daring that reflect the ‘care, share, dare’ behaviours are now valued over conformity and defence of the status quo. Leaders are now charged with creating a diverse and inclusive workplace, representative of the constituents they serve. Getting on board with these changes is compulsory.

At VicRoads there is action behind the diversity rhetoric, and many women and men are rightly proud of the organisation’s progress towards equality in recent times. The people in this book are excited about the new opportunities presented to them and are grabbing them with both hands. Their lives are changing. It’s exhilarating and

exhausting in equal measure.

Many VicRoads leaders understand the benefits of creating a truly diverse and inclusive organisation, and are engaging their hearts and their minds to make it happen. There will be other people who don't get it, who may be either openly hostile or passively resisting, thinking 'please wake me up when it's over', assuming that eventually normal programming will resume. This group, if they continue to operate with old views that are out of step with the new organisation, will be a shrinking pool.

A truly diverse culture is, of course, much more than achieving gender equality, and achieving cultural diversity is the next frontier. However, a recent study by Monash

University found that men born in Australia were twice as intolerant of cultural diversity as women, with 35 per cent of men surveyed rejecting cultural diversity compared to 17 per cent of women.* So it makes a whole lot of sense to increase the number of women in an organisation and lay the groundwork to generate greater acceptance of difference in all ways.

Developing a company's culture is a never-ending journey and the organisation's leaders need to be relentless in pursuing diversity and inclusion in order to stay on the path.

As more women are noticeably successful, more women will be hired. As women move into leadership roles, the stereotype of what a leader is will change and a more balanced model will take root. This is the start of lasting change.

'A truly diverse culture is, of course, much more than achieving gender equality, and achieving cultural diversity is the next frontier.'

* Markus, *Mapping Social Cohesion 2015 National Report* (Scanlon Foundation, 2015).

‘It is not our differences that
divide us. It is our inability to
recognise, accept and celebrate
those differences.’

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE,
NIGERIAN AUTHOR



Robyn Robb

When Robyn isn't at work she enjoys going out for lunch with loved ones, exercising at the local pool, taking her ninety-five-year-old mum out for lunch, and planning holidays with her husband. Holidays take a lot more planning when travelling with a wheelchair and various other aids. Robyn's next big challenge will probably be retirement. She is still coming to terms with the thought that when she joined the Country Roads Board in 1969, legislation required everyone to retire by sixty-five. Sometimes she thinks maybe she is already past her use-by date, but often feels that isn't the case just yet.

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The Age of Aquarius

Robyn Robb

It was the late 1960s and a time of great political and social upheaval. Children of the post-war era were growing up and protesting against conscription and the Vietnam War, while Harold Holt defended Australia's involvement in the war, with the slogan: 'All the way with LBJ'. By 1968, Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War ended due to these public protests.

The 1960s were also a decade when many women felt there was more to life than raising children and managing a household, and wanted to break away from the traditional career choices of nurse, teacher or secretary. They were demanding greater equality in the workplace, fairer wages, free education and recognition of rights for Indigenous Australians. The contraceptive pill was introduced, granting women greater sexual freedom and control over their bodies. The hippie movement was in full swing, dictating fashion, music, a drugs culture and the rise of eastern mysticism.

In 1969, Elvis Presley made us cry with 'In the Ghetto', John Lennon soothed us with 'Let It Be' and The 5th Dimension excited us with their medley 'Aquarius / Let the Sunshine In'. The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) won the right for equal pay for women. Robyn Robb joined the Country Roads Board (CRB, now VicRoads).

Amidst the social, political and economic upheaval of the 1960s the CRB was a stable, safe and reliable public sector organisation run by professional engineers with conservative values. Lifetime employment

was part of its attraction and employees could work their way up from the entry level to senior executive over time.

Typing pools and tea ladies

Robyn is a delightful, down-to-earth and softly-spoken woman, with a wicked sense of humour. She buzzed in on her electric wheelchair and entertained me with stories of working life in the 1960s and beyond, how she broke free from conventions, how she respectfully stood up for herself, and the ways in which she gained the trust and friendship of all who worked with her.

Robyn was in a unique position and experienced all the key social and economic changes confronting business throughout her forty-seven years of employment. From the days of strict working hours, typing pools and the much-loved tea lady, she witnessed the emergence of computers, the gradual shift towards diverse patterns of work and hours, and women laying claim to senior engineering and leadership roles. Back then, she would never have dreamed that women would be provided with paid parental leave, that flexible hours would become the norm, that employees could be working from home and that VicRoads would have a female regional director. One might say VicRoads has undertaken the classic journey of social and business transformation that many Australian businesses have also undertaken.

She was attracted to the CRB after a friend described it as a great place to work. After enquiring about a job and following a somewhat cursory interview process, she was offered a job pretty much on the spot and commenced the following Monday. Not sure what job she had been offered, but expecting it to be in the personnel section where her friend worked, she showed up to work and was directed to a typing pool. At first she thought perhaps this was some sort of induction, then after a couple of weeks she concluded that this must be where she would be working. Too shy to ask and not encouraged by the formal culture, she stayed on. Nevertheless, she enjoyed the people and felt it *was* a great place to work – ‘a bit like a family’. They were protected and cared for, provided they followed the rules and obeyed the strict codes of behaviour. You could say the organisation was run with a high level of respect, but it was respect often based on fear:

The senior people were very protective of you and they would point out where you went wrong, where you were going wrong, what you should be doing and what you shouldn't be doing. You would be corrected. A manager was like a strict father-figure and you wouldn't disrespect your father or you'd be in trouble.

A typical day would start at floor control. Work commenced at 8.30 am and finished at 4.51 pm and everyone signed in on timesheets. If you were late for work you signed on in a red pen at the personnel section where the timesheets would be lodged. If you had more than three red entries in one month your supervisor would be required to send a memo (hard copy of course) to the personnel manager, explaining why you were late and how they would ensure that it never happened again. This procedure led to a rather comical race around the building when someone was late, trying to locate where the timesheets might be before they were lodged at personnel:

If you got to your floor and, when the lifts opened, you saw the sheets weren't there at the floor control desk, you'd have to try and second-guess where they were: which person was picking up the sheets, which stairwell they were using and whether they were going up the stairs to collect them or were going down the stairs. You'd try to remember who you thought might be doing it that day, because they each had their own routines. You'd be flying up and down the stairs trying to find the people with the sheets, and pleading, 'Can I sign on?'

Although the ban on married women working in the public service was lifted in 1966, most women working at the CRB were unmarried and allocated to typing pools. They mostly left when they married. Those women who remained unmarried became typing pool supervisors. Mrs Moon was an exception. She was married and came back to work. Mrs Moon was quite matronly and strict, Robyn recalls. She was the unofficial go-to person for any issues with the female staff – the men, of course, didn't want to deal with women's problems.

One day Robyn wore a pants suit to work. Pretty soon she received a message to go and see Mrs Moon. 'Gosh, that was pretty daunting to have to go and see Mrs Moon. It was a bit like going to see the headmistress,' Robyn recalls. The conversation went something like this:

Mrs Moon: 'Look, I'm really sorry Robyn, but you can't wear

pants to work. Is there any reason you have to wear them?’

Robyn: ‘No, it’s just that it is very cold today.’

Mrs Moon: ‘Oh, well, I’m sorry, you’ll have to go home and change.’

Robyn went back to the office to get her bag, mortified at the length of time it would take out of her day to go home for what seemed like a silly reason, when she had a sudden inspiration: ‘I’ll just take the pants off and see if I can just wear the jacket.’ It was fashionable to wear short skirts in those days and she was wearing a mid-thigh length jacket. So she went into the toilets, took the pants off, and went back to Mrs Moon. ‘Is this alright?’ she asked.

‘That’s perfectly acceptable, my dear,’ replied Mrs Moon.

So, for the rest of the day, Robyn sat in her stockings, knickers and jacket!

A three-year plan that stretched to forty-seven years

About eighteen months later, Robyn became the youngest secretary to be appointed to work for the chief works engineer, a very exciting opportunity, although she was still part of a small typing pool. Out of the clutches of Mrs Moon, she had now entered Miss Martin’s territory. Being a quick and accurate typist, Robyn was given work other typists should have been doing and one day she complained about her workload compared to a lazy typist who was not pulling her weight. The following morning, she was aghast to arrive at work and see her desk and typewriter gone. She feared she had lost her job for her ‘insolence’. She went into the administration area to ask, and there stood her desk. From then on she was told she would work for the administration team, and has loved it ever since:

Everybody, right from the day I started, has just been so supportive, really nice, just like family. I still feel the same. I really love the people I work with. I love the work I’m doing. I’m so lucky.

However, she had no intention of staying for forty-seven years – her career plan stretched to a maximum of three years!

Those were the days before computers, with typewriters and six carbon copies. Complicated monthly schedules to the minister were a nightmare. You weren’t allowed to make a mistake, or rub anything

out. If you made a mistake you had to start the report from scratch.

Technology and the computer age began to transform the way people worked. Most of the engineers took to it with gusto. The introduction of computers also provided opportunities for Robyn to take her career in a different direction. She had accepted a number of secondments to other departments during her eighteen months in the typing pool, and now, in her new role working for the chief works engineer, she was offered a three-month secondment to a project to transfer all the bridge specifications onto the new computer system.

‘I’m still doing it,’ she laughs. ‘Twenty years later one of the engineers said to me, “Haven’t you finished that job yet?” It has just morphed into a whole other job. Agreeing to that secondment was the best thing I ever did.’

The annual balls were the highlight of the yearly calendar at the CRB. The women were allowed to leave at 4.00 pm to get ready:

Oh, the balls were just magnificent. You’d get really dressed up, go to the hairdresser, get your hair all piled up on top. Makeup and false eyelashes, do your nails, long dresses and gloves, the whole works.

Unique challenges as a woman with a disability* at VicRoads

After Robyn married, she became one of the growing number of women who elected to continue their career. As a married woman, she was excluded from the state superannuation scheme (SSS) but could elect to join the married women’s superannuation scheme, a fund with inferior retirement and disability benefits. Membership of a superannuation fund was not considered necessary for married women. It was presumed that the husband’s superannuation contributions would fund the family retirement income. As a result, many women worked much of their lives without accruing retirement benefits, which were compulsorily accrued for men. It was not until 1975 that married women had access to the revised state superannuation

* Robyn has Kugelberg Welander syndrome, a rare inherited neuromuscular disorder characterised by wasting of, and weakness in, the muscles of the arms and legs, leading to walking difficulties, and eventual loss of ambulation.

scheme, provided they passed a medical examination.

Robyn chuckles as she remembers catching a ride in to Spring Street with a few fellows from the mailroom, to undertake her medical examination. At this stage, she was having some difficulty walking but was not yet in a wheelchair, as she is today. The medical examiner, a rather long-in-the-tooth doctor, began the medical examination and Robyn could see the look of growing concern, then trepidation, as his examination concluded. Finally, he told her to get dressed. But he was so concerned for her welfare that once she had got dressed he hung onto her in a kind of desperate bear hug, fearful that she would be unable to walk – even though he had seen her enter the examination room on her own. She assured him she would be OK, but to no avail. He insisted on supporting her and she could hardly walk, she recalls, because he was making it so awkward for her. So imagine the shock on the faces of the mailroom men when she was shuffled back into the waiting room, unable to walk properly, propped up by the medical examiner. They thought something terrible had happened to her during the examination!

Robyn had the last laugh, however. The medical examiner refused her full superannuation benefits so she remained in the married women's scheme, a more lucrative proposition than accepting limited benefits in the general fund. She's still in it, almost certainly the only woman left in the old scheme, as everyone else has either left VicRoads or transitioned to the current scheme!

Being a woman with a disability had its own unique challenges in the 1970s. The Disability Discrimination Act wasn't passed into legislation until 1992, so discrimination against people with disabilities was a common occurrence in employment in the 1970s and 1980s, in ways not conceivable today. Robyn recalls applying for a job in public relations and being knocked back because they believed she would be unable to undertake some duties, like setting up displays. Today, of course, employers must consider how the person with a disability could be provided with reasonable adjustments to help them do the job. Back then she was automatically excluded from jobs that may have entailed physical work.

By the early 1990s, her walking was becoming more difficult and

she was using a four-wheeled walking frame. Getting in and out of the building each day was becoming a real challenge, as it had two steps, no handrail and a heavy glass door. So she requested the CRB to provide a ramp to assist her to negotiate the step outside the entrance to the building. Her request was denied on the grounds that it could interfere with cars arriving at the front door. She was asked to use the goods lift entrance instead, which was the only entrance to the building that didn't involve steps.

I thought to myself, 'An engineering organisation with 1200 people in it, a big percentage of them engineers, and they can't manage to install a ramp at the front?'

Robyn is fairly sure this was a decision made by the 'bean counters' in the building and, knowing how accommodating the engineers themselves are at VicRoads, doubts the engineers were even consulted.

Years down the track, a VicRoads surveyor was injured in a trench cave-in and a ramp was installed at the front door to assist him to return to work in his wheelchair. This new, first-generation ramp was a boon to Robyn, who was now able to enter the building from the front entrance like everyone else. It was particularly useful after she broke her leg in 2003 and her mobility suffered to the point that she started using a mobility scooter to move around at work.

Robyn will be approaching her fiftieth anniversary at VicRoads in a few years and she reflects on why she is still here. There are many reasons: interesting work, opportunities to advance and recognition for her effort. Perhaps one of the biggest reasons is the bond she has developed with her colleagues over the years; the kindness and consideration she received, especially from those in her own small team. They have looked out for her at every opportunity, and there have been countless examples of unsolicited help or offers of help, which have made her work life so much easier.

She recalls an early-morning incident where there was a problem with the wheels on her mobility scooter. It couldn't have happened at a better place – with only three staff in the office, two of them engi-

neers, they got out a selection of tools, improvised additional tools where they needed and fixed the problem. The boss arrived at the other end of the office, saw a row of empty desks and asked Robyn where everyone was:

I pointed to the floor and he looked at me quizzically. He started to walk towards me and then noticed three pairs of legs sticking out into the passage. We all had a great laugh about it. And, to top it off, they had fixed my scooter.

Fast-forward to today and Robyn marvels at how everyone is treated equally; working days are now totally flexible, people work from home, over a third of the workforce are women and women are now holding senior technical and leadership positions. The CEO asks her to call him John rather than Mr Merritt. She's getting used to it. Many of the routine jobs are gone, the typing pool, the tea lady and the annual balls have been relegated to history, and engineers now type their own reports on their laptops.

VicRoads is a work in progress with some unfinished business still on the agenda.

However, the second-generation wheelchair ramp eventually installed at the front of the building is looking great! Its design is simple and attractive, as well as being spectacularly useful for all levels of ability, and it certainly doesn't interfere with cars arriving at the front door.



Amy Rowan

Amy Rowan, director corporate transformation, has worked at VicRoads for fifteen years, starting in the graduate program.

Since then, she has held numerous positions across the organisation. During this time, she has married and become a mum to three beautiful children – Archer, Bella and Harvey. For the last seven years, she has successfully juggled the demands of having a career and making time for her family, while also carving a successful career for herself at VicRoads. Amy shares her position as the director corporate transformation with Vanessa Nativo, the first permanent job-share role at VicRoads.



Vanessa Nativo

Vanessa, director corporate transformation, joined VicRoads in the graduate program and then spent most of her early career within the Major Projects Division. The death of a close friend made her realise that life is too short, and she embarked on an eighteen-month working holiday. It was her love of family and friends that brought Vanessa back to her career at VicRoads. Vanessa has held a number of leadership positions, the most recent as the director corporate transformation, which she job-shares with Amy Rowan. The flexibility that this provides allows Vanessa to maintain the work-life balance needed to care for her family.

The duet

Amy Rowan & Vanessa Nativo

Duet: an action or activity performed by a pair of closely connected individuals, *Collins English Dictionary*

The Amy and Vanessa show

As directors of corporate transformation, Amy and Vanessa occupy the first director-level job-share position at VicRoads. Both are ambitious, high-achieving women, with full and satisfying careers still ahead of them. They commenced at VicRoads in the graduate program in 2001 and their career paths have run parallel ever since. Their motivation and determination to carve out rewarding and challenging careers meant they were not prepared to step back after returning from maternity leave. Their ability to job-share has made the difference between progressing in their careers and stagnating. It has also reaped significant performance and productivity outcomes for VicRoads, as both women go the extra mile to ensure its success. Everyone is a winner.

They started by developing the business case and confidently put themselves forward as a job-share alternative that could work. They did whatever it took to create a seamless experience for their staff and stakeholders.

The risk was worth it

Amy and Vanessa's job-sharing story began after an organisation restructure in 2012. When two part-timers in Vanessa's work area

elected to take a redundancy package, she ended up doing the work of all three of them, working long hours and making big personal sacrifices to get the work done. This situation was not sustainable. The best solution was to find a person she respected and trusted to share the workload. Amy was returning from maternity leave and the timing was perfect. The restructure provided them with an opportunity to be appointed to a position together and offered them a work-life balance that didn't derail their careers.

Amy and I both wanted the same role. It wasn't advertised as a job-share. We put it to them. We said, 'This is a solution'. Gerry George, the manager of this role at the time, said, 'Why wouldn't I take up that offer to have two of you instead of one person?'

The job-share was a success from the start. The work was challenging and they reported to an outstanding manager who trusted them implicitly and enabled them to work as flexibly as they needed.

It would have been easy to cruise in the role for the long-term – to enjoy the partnership, have a comfortable workload and experience minimal stress in balancing their work and private lives. But anyone who knows these women would know they are not the kind to put their careers on hold for long or to linger in a career rut.

In late 2014, KPMG (a financial advisory service) handed down its review into VicRoads' governance and risk and compliance systems, and created an exciting project opportunity to implement these recommendations. Amy and Vanessa decided to grab this chance. It would stretch their capabilities, apply their skills in a different direction and add value to VicRoads in a new and important way. The catch was that it was a secondment.

Applying for this secondment meant they could lose some of the flexibility that they wanted and needed, and it would push them way out of their comfort zones. Was this move brave and courageous, or risky and foolhardy? Amy and Vanessa had a long-term view of this opportunity. They were prepared to give up security for the experience of working on a new and challenging project that, they hoped, would lead to other opportunities once the project reached its conclusion.

Their instincts were right. They have just been appointed to the role of director corporate transformation, the first permanent

job shared at this level. This is a broader role responsible for corporate planning, internal communications, innovation and several other pop-up programs arising from VicRoads' cultural transformation strategy. The experience they have gained from their secondment, combined with the strong relationships they have forged along the way, has placed them well for this role, something they would not have achieved had they not moved out of their comfort zone.

The power of two

Flexible working arrangements and job-share policies are common enough in lower-level roles that do not deal directly with customer or lead teams, but they are uncommon at a business-critical director level. Amy and Vanessa's experience has demonstrated that job-sharing can work successfully at a senior level and in a role where managing and motivating a team is critical. They don't blow their own trumpets and they have heard people say, 'How did they do that?' once they discover their seniority – presumably this question is based on the premise that job-sharing is not available at senior levels. It takes courage to break down the status quo and create a 'new normal'.

Job-sharing may be an additional cost to an employer, such as additional full-time equivalent (FTE) headcount to cover overlapping days, but the extra skills, talent retention and productivity enhancements make for a compelling case. Research conducted by The Job Share Project* identified an increase of up to 30 per cent productivity gained through two people sharing a job.

The secret to successfully setting up a job-share arrangement was having a strong proposal that clearly outlined the benefits to their manager. In each of the job-share roles they came as a package, arguing that they had related but different capabilities and could bring more to the job than one person alone. They also considered the logistics of how the role would be carried out, how they could maximise their different but complementary skills, how deadlines would be met, how emergencies would be handled, how communication and handover between them would work, and how they would communicate on

* Daniels, *Job Sharing at Senior Level: Making It Work* (Capability Jane, 2011).

days they were not in the office. In the end, selling the idea wasn't that difficult. They were effectively offering two people for the price of one.

The details of success

Once they had successfully convinced their manager they could perform one job between the two of them, they made it work on a day-to-day basis.

They are each in the office two days per week and work one day from home (twenty-four hours each), with one crossover day – Thursday; neither of them is in the office on Fridays. A crossover day is important for communication and seamless integration. However, they remain flexible. If something important is scheduled on a Friday, they work it out and one of them just rearranges their hours. Working in the evening hours is par for the course. Amy says:

Everyone's job-share is different, but it feels like ours wouldn't work if we didn't have the ability to work late at night, because our kids are little and we need to go to appointments. I leave the office at 3.30 pm every day, and that allows me to go home and spend time with my children. People may see me send out an email at 10.30 or 11.30 at night.

Management trust and support is essential. They have had fantastically supportive managers in both roles and are totally trusted to deliver results in whichever way works for them. Looking around the organisation, they consider themselves lucky. There are pockets of resistance, usually from managers who believe in a directive, autocratic and hierarchical management style. These managers generally resist job-sharing, possibly because of a lack of trust in their staff, the fear of losing control, or because they believe that workers simply have to be visible. Amy:

There are some people in the organisation that do it fantastically and there are some that do it really badly. I heard of one manager who still talks down to women [who access the flexible hours policy], even introducing them to people like, 'This is so-and-so, but she's only part-time,' or, 'This is so-and-so, I don't know when she's in the office.' That's really derogatory towards the arrangement, so these women don't feel valued.

However, there is so much support from senior executives at VicRoads that the real challenge is with convincing staff. There are two ways in which Vanessa and Amy encourage staff to accept it and understand how it works. First, Vanessa shares her own personal struggles and challenges, and why she needs flexibility, so they understand why she has an appointment on a particular day. Secondly, they encourage staff to experience the benefits of flexible arrangements themselves. Amy says:

The bigger challenge is getting our team to buy into it and realise the benefits – and they have done a great job. A lot of them are working flexibly and therefore they’re all supporting each other because they all want to keep these great working arrangements.

The team has been quite supportive, but at times put them through their paces. Some were sceptical of the arrangement and, although neither of them have

‘At the start of the job-share arrangement some people and colleagues played one off against the other.’

mentioned this, they must have felt they were constantly on trial with some staff members.

At the start of the job-share arrangement some people and colleagues played one off against the other – a bit like children testing boundaries with their parents: ‘Vanessa said this,’ they would say to Amy. Amy and Vanessa wanted it to be very clear that anyone could contact either of them about any issue and receive the same response: ‘It doesn’t matter whether you’re talking to Vanessa or Amy, you’re still going to get that same answer.’

Their colleagues also needed assurances that they would be available even if they were not physically in the office. Vanessa remembers:

The agreement we had was that we’re available to anyone if they need us. Just because we’re not in the office doesn’t mean that we’re not available... They can ring me, I’m not necessarily going to answer it if I’m in the middle of my swimming lessons with my kid but if it’s urgent, they can leave me a message and I’ll get back to them as soon as I can. If there’s something they need, they shouldn’t wait.

So while there were sometimes challenges to sharing a role, Vanessa

and Amy acknowledge the need for a supportive team. Without this, the job-share would not have been as successful as it was.

Lessons in life and leadership

Amy and Vanessa learned a lot about themselves, about effective leadership and about getting the best out of others – lessons that they will take with them to their next role.

A personal light bulb moment came for Amy at VicRoads' 2015 International Women's Day event. She asked the speaker, Cheryl Batagol, Environment Protection Authority Victoria's (EPA) chairperson, about managing one of Amy's greatest fears:

I asked her how to deal with the perception people have that, just because you're not in the office, you're not working. I was really hung up on it. She told me to let it go. It's my perception, not theirs. 'You just have to let that go because half the people don't even think it, you just think they think it.'

There was also a personal lesson about being courageous and living with risk. Both women left a permanent role for a fixed-term project role, in the hope and belief that the experience they would gain would establish their credentials, wherever that may lead. They succeeded in creating a job-share arrangement because they put the business case together and presented it to management. That takes courage, risk-taking and self-belief. Vanessa recalls a conversation she had with another woman at VicRoads:

This woman said, 'I would never be allowed to work from home like you.' I said, 'Why don't you ask? It doesn't need to be all the time, but once every now and again why couldn't you do it?' So she did and all of a sudden she got this flexibility to start working from home too.

Leading by example was another valuable lesson. Vanessa recalls working through her lunch break to get as much work completed as possible so she could get out the door at 3.30 pm.

All of a sudden, all the team were sitting through eating their lunch. I had to really make a conscious effort to stop doing that so much or at least have the conversation, 'Just because I'm doing this doesn't mean that my expectation is that you're doing that as well.'

Vanessa stresses that just because she is sending out emails late in

the evening, she doesn't expect the recipients to do the same. She will often preface the email with, 'I don't expect an answer straight away, I'm sending this email because it suits me to send it now.'

Crossing the red line

Amy and Vanessa are growing into their leadership. Their new appointment to director, leading a team of up to seventeen staff, will require a seismic shift in leadership perspective and focus. They recognise they are both 'doers' and will need to learn to move from being specialists and problem-solvers towards being strategic thinkers and enabling others. Their horizons will shift from short-term thinking to longer-term envisioning, from tactical responses to strategic solutions. They were impressed by the way the Royal Children's Hospital tackles this challenge. In the emergency department, the person in charge must stand back behind a red line and allow others to attend to the emergency, preventing them from micromanaging. If they cross that red line, they lose visibility of what is going on. Vanessa reflects:

I think hearing that was a moment of truth for me where I went, 'Yep, I'm doing too much of the leaning over trying to get involved, and not necessarily enough of the big picture, strategic component.' That red line is something that I see I need to work on, that stepping back.

Setting up for success

There are different ingredients that create success in a job-sharing partnership. Everyone's job-share is different and you need to work out the logistics with each other. Nevertheless, there are five Cs – chemistry, complementary skills, compatibility, commitment and communication – that are critical for any successful job-share opportunity.

1. There should be **chemistry.**

It is a slightly vague term for the complex emotional and psychological connections between people, but is essential for success.

It helps that Amy and Vanessa like, admire and respect each other and are firm friends. After all, they need to rely on each other and think as one unit at all times. Vanessa:

In our job-share we are kind of one person and it's critical for us to have a relationship where you completely trust that other person and will back and support them. We've been in meetings before and been able to communicate just by looking at each other, and our manager is like, 'Oh my gosh, they're even talking to each other across their own wavelength.'

2. Having **complementary skills** is a big asset.

Amy and Vanessa have different strengths and capabilities – Amy has more core business experience and Vanessa has more operating experience. They also play the 'good cop / bad cop' roles when needed. Their complementary skills have enabled them to overcome road-blocks in thinking and refine ideas. Amy:

I remember that once we were trying to work out how to run a workshop. We hadn't done anything like that before and we were thinking, 'Crap, we haven't worked this out.' We started writing some stuff on butcher's paper and Vanessa had clear in her head what she was going to do and I was like, 'Is that going to work?' We just kept working on it. Then I came up with another idea and Vanessa went, 'Yes, that's it.'

Although they have different skill sets, they have a common set of values and a common approach to work, so the job-share arrangement works seamlessly. Both are extremely diligent, detail-minded, dedicated to delivering on time against tight deadlines, and totally customer-focused. If one of them was more focused on deadlines and the other more casual about meeting deadlines, for instance, you could see how conflict could arise.

3. **Compatibility** is critical.

Sharing one role means Amy and Vanessa have to be interchangeable. They pass projects back and forth, constantly and seamlessly. Neither of them 'own' any particular task; the person who is in the office takes care of any needs as they come up and manages team issues and challenges as seamlessly as possible.

4. Job-sharing is a huge **commitment**.

Job-sharing is about give and take, requiring that each partner is flex-

ible and can accommodate unexpected demands on their time.

It is important not to underestimate the extra time it takes to ensure success in a job-share arrangement. Job-sharers often work long hours on their working days, even if they are working from home, and often give their own time on non-work days for handover and communication. Amy thinks job-sharing is not for everyone:

I don't think everyone can do it. You have to give 110 per cent. If you're someone who just wants to go home and switch off, I'm not sure it would work. I can't imagine saying to Vanessa, 'Don't ring me outside of these hours.' I don't see how that works.

For Vanessa, returning to work was especially challenging because her daughter had been diagnosed with epilepsy. Lots of medical appointments are just part of her life:

I've got fortnightly speech appointments, fortnightly occupational therapy appointments; I've got three appointments with neurologists per month, and probably three more appointments with the paediatrician per month. Having flexibility means I can go to these appointments, so then, when I am at work, I'm focused and I know that my mind is on the job, whereas if I wasn't given that flexibility my mind would be elsewhere.

'If you're someone who just wants to go home and switch off, I'm not sure it would work.'

On the other hand, Amy has more flexibility as her husband works from home, so she can more easily accommodate changes of plans and support Vanessa when an urgent appointment or unexpected event means she has to be away from the office or can't get to a Friday meeting.

5. **Communication** is key.

It is crucial that people communicate with each other, with individual team members, with the team as a whole and with the broader organisation.

Providing seamless team leadership placed a large burden on Amy and Vanessa to debrief each other regularly. They tried out several options until they found a strategy that worked for them. Amy started

by writing long and time-consuming emails to Vanessa at the end of each day. They then trialled to-do lists and comments. Eventually, they settled on a more efficient process involving a phone call to each other in the evenings.

Communication with the whole team was a challenge on more than one front. Team meetings were important, and something that took some time to get right. Their crossover day, Thursday, was usually chock-full of internal meetings or activities requiring both their attention. This meant that often their team meetings were rescheduled or cancelled, which was unfair to the team. Amy:

We were just too busy. We were doing, doing, doing and we weren't making time for the staff. When we asked staff, 'What do you want?' team meetings were one of the things they identified.

Team meetings are now a high priority and rarely cancelled.

Amy and Vanessa also take responsibility for educating the organisation about job-sharing; they don't assume that everyone understands their job-share arrangement or the specific challenges that a job-share entails.

Beyond progress, to lasting success

Successful role models like Amy and Vanessa play a critical part in breaking down management or staff resistance and creating acceptance and understanding of different ways of working.

However, the opportunity exists to expand the uptake of flexible working arrangements beyond working mothers, to working parents in general. When both parents job-share, its acceptance as a normal way of working will grow. But let's go further. While working parents are the obvious example for job-sharing, other men and women could choose to access flexibility or take up a job-share opportunity for a number of reasons. Examples might be staff who wish to study, travel, transition to retirement, or take up a job-share or flexible arrangement following a restructure where fewer full-time roles may be available.

The idea is to create people-friendly workplace arrangements and for different work patterns to become a normal way of working across all levels of VicRoads, rather than being considered a privilege, or metered out by a manager based on some subjective criteria.

Getting a promotion while on maternity leave? Restructuring a full-time role into a job-share arrangement? Wow! These women's careers were interrupted, but they demonstrated that women *can* overcome the motherhood penalty that many women experience, resume their careers and flourish. They created a working relationship that is not only rewarding and satisfying for them, but offered VicRoads broader skills of a higher quality, and more commitment than a single person could offer on their own.



Paula Doherty

Paula, finance business partner, has always been on a journey to build her career, raise a young family and help one of her children, who has additional needs, thrive. Certain situations have not been easy. But, when she looks back, those situations have helped shape the way she approaches things, her career journey and the positive, passionate person she has become, and helped her to carve out a successful career.

When career and motherhood collide

Paula Doherty

There are no prizes for mothering in the face of overwhelming adversity – if there were, Paula would surely deserve a medal as large and magnificent as her awe-inspiring commitment to her children.

When I met Paula, I saw a woman who is self-assured, confident and capable, someone who enjoys her job and has forged a successful career at VicRoads. But it wasn't always this way, and career success didn't come easy. It was all about grit, determination, unrelenting hard work and a strong self-belief.

Paula is the mother of three beautiful children, and Paula's first son, Aidan, has complex health and disability challenges related to his autism. The expectation of motherhood is vastly different to reality, especially when you are the mother of a child on the autism spectrum.

Paula's graduate experience

Paula joined VicRoads through the graduate program after completing a Bachelor of Business at Swinburne University. From the outset, it was clear that VicRoads was a male-dominated organisation with a stark lack of female role models in finance. Even as a graduate, Paula observed subtle forms of discrimination where male graduates would somehow be favoured for leadership roles. She described these experiences as somewhat disheartening. I suspect it was also incredibly disempowering. Paula was told, 'You'd make a great PA', a remark that may have been meant as a compliment. As much as she admired many of the capable PAs at VicRoads, she was committed to pursuing

a senior leadership career in finance. With these kinds of remarks and observations made about her by others, her career goal seemed a long way out of reach.

It's not just a juggle, it's a struggle

Paula became a mum right in those critical early years of a woman's career, while also pursuing professional studies to qualify as a certified public accountant (CPA). She recalls receiving her CPA study books on the very day she went into labour with her first son. She spent the first three months of his life studying, then sat a three-hour exam with her body telling her she really needed to feed her baby – *now!* Her second child was also born while she was still completing her studies.

She accepted a leadership role as business services manager on the Westgate Bridge Strengthening Project, leading a team that produced budget reports and forecasts against KPIs – a step up in her career, but not a role many people would knowingly take on. For starters, it involved a one-and-a-half-hour daily commute each way. Then, just as she was getting settled into this role, she discovered her first child had a disability affecting his walking capacity and, soon after, he was diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum. Raising a child with autism is a constant challenge, requiring a 24/7 attention. All Paula's free time was spent learning about ways she could help him, but nothing could prepare her for the seemingly endless medical appointments, the daily uncertainty of behavioural meltdowns and the emotional roller-coaster on which she travelled.

When I'd get up in the morning, my day could go really smoothly, or my day could go really badly. Every single item of the morning could be incredibly slow, where he could just put on one sock and then not be able to put on anything else, and we could go through an entire hour of trying to get him dressed, or to eat one tiny bit of food.

Paula had days where she felt total overwhelmed by taking responsibility for Aidan's needs, along with bringing up two other beautiful children, Liam and Isla, as well as somehow keeping her career from falling off a cliff. 'Liam's whole childhood was either me working, or me taking Aidan to appointments – that's just how it worked out.'

Paula desperately needed support in these early years, but that was something she could not take for granted. Many women have a sympathetic work environment, and a group of friends where they can offload or share experiences. Paula had her parents and a life partner to share the load whenever possible, but little support from other quarters.

Daily challenges

On the work front, strict routines and daily deadlines were the order of the day. There was little job flexibility, and much less empathy for working mothers who struggled to cope with punishing work schedules. The demands of parenthood had little place in the world of work, and women were expected to fit in or leave. In Paula's case, there wasn't much understanding of the impact of having a child on the autism spectrum and of the specific challenges that involved. At times, she felt her manager was placing even greater demands on her than others in the team. Despite the odds, Paula was determined to prove her capability and to demonstrate that being a mother was not going to be a career-killer. So she worked extraordinary hours after her children were in bed to produce reports and deliver deadlines that others, with less demands from their home life, would have easily finished within a normal working day.

Paula also felt disconnected from her work colleagues as she saw opportunities pass her by. It was like her nose was pressed to the window, watching fellow graduates progress their careers, while hers was being left behind. She was the first in her graduate group to have children and her child was different, so she found it hard to connect with other mums, her friends and her work colleagues.

Her husband, Wayne, the main income earner, worked long hours and was sometimes away on business, so they had almost no time together, and he was not able to provide support with necessary appointments and the daily issues of autism. Her two other children

‘Despite the odds, Paula was determined to prove her capability and to demonstrate that being a mother was not going to be a career-killer.’

also had to take a back seat, with Aidan's needs always at the forefront. You could say that simply getting through each day became a challenge.

Overwhelmed, she turned to her parents for support. They were there for her when she couldn't get away from work to attend medical appointments or when Aidan was uncooperative in the mornings. Paula cannot imagine surviving the early years without their availability and support. Yet within this chaotic environment, there was much-needed understanding from Aidan's younger brother, Liam, who recognised Aidan's special needs from a very early age and provided calmness and understanding.

Right from a young age, Liam could recognise that Aidan's not quite the same as everyone else, and he just adapts and helps Aidan through, which is amazing. Right from a little kid, if Aidan was having a meltdown because Liam was sitting in his seat at the table, Liam would just move. He would not have a problem with it, just say, 'Oh, I'll get that for Aidan,' or, 'If he wants that that way, I'll make it that way for him.'

The long road back to career success

After struggling to keep her career on track she found herself having her third child while VicRoads went through a complete restructure. She returned to work from maternity leave, realising she had been out of the loop and had lost her networks and support. Her confidence took a hit. After she performed poorly at several internal job interviews, she felt compelled to relinquish her leadership status and accept a lower-level role – the only role on offer. In effect, she felt she had travelled backwards to the beginning of her career. This was one of the lowest points in Paula's career.

It felt awful. It felt like I wasn't valued at all. I'd spent so many years in a leadership role and then to go for a couple of interviews and just miss out on everything. I felt like I had no idea. I didn't know what was going on. I'd been away for a year at that point and I didn't have the networks. It was competitive and people wouldn't give me the information I needed to do well. I had to go for a role I knew nothing about, so it was really difficult.

These are the times when one discovers the true meaning of resilience.

She persevered despite the adversity. Women have been known to put up with seemingly overwhelming odds for many reasons: because they want to prove their capability, because they're trying to deal with it on their own, because they don't want to rock the boat, or because they have families to support and can't afford to lose a job. To some extent, Paula could identify with all these reasons.

Paula's story demonstrates that inflexible leadership styles and outdated attitudes about the nature of work create barriers that limit and disadvantage women in small but cumulative ways, whilst simultaneously giving advantage to many men. These barriers are often tacit, but just as damaging to women's career prospects as explicit discriminatory practices.

But this is not the end of Paula's story. Several key events coalesced to transform Paula's life into what it is today. First, her father elected to take early retirement at age fifty-three, when Aidan started school. This decision alone enabled Paula to continue her career.

Without my dad retiring I don't think I would be in the same situation I am in now. I think I would have had to have stopped work and been a full-time carer. When Aidan went back to school, he was looking like we were going to have to put him into a wheelchair but my dad just refused. 'No, we're not doing that,' he said, 'we're going to more physio, we're going to overcome this.' He just bumped it up and he was there the whole time to help me with it.

Positive workplace change – at last

Then her work environment started to change in perceptible ways. The new 'care, share, dare' culture really began to take hold.

Just introducing the really simple 'care, share, dare' approach has just made it easy – everyone is talking the same language. They want an environment where it feels good to come to work. They don't want us to compete against each other. What I'm seeing across all the teams in finance is that we'll work together and then we'll partner with our clients and figure out the best way to accomplish something. It's the way people want to work and I think that's why it's working.

Flexible work practices are now an accepted part of the way people work and they're not just for women. They are now lived and embedded into key business outcomes and in significant career decisions.

Women who come back from maternity leave now are so accepted, in whatever way that they want to work, whether they want to go full-time, part-time, certain days, different hours. In the greater finance group, we've had a man go on paternity leave for six months, which just never happened, and he felt comfortable to do that. I think that's absolutely brilliant.

Sure, there are still some old-timers around who refuse to change, but there are consequences for those who are not on board:

Those people who are talking behind people's backs, being negatively disruptive – it's noticed. They're not being promoted; I can see that they're not being offered opportunities. There's a direct link between behaviour and promotion.

Women are also being offered challenging secondment opportunities across VicRoads, which are beginning to close the experience gap and prepare them to apply on merit for full-time senior roles. With two previous secondments under her belt, Paula has gained the experience to succeed in her current secondment.

Participating in a mentoring program was another turning point. As part of its commitment to creating a more diverse and inclusive workplace, VicRoads introduced My Mentor.* Paula was encouraged to participate. She discovered that working with a mentor helped her recognise her potential, encouraged her to believe in herself and totally transformed her career.

The My Mentor program shifted the way I think and it changed the direction I was heading in. I thought I was just going to be here as an analyst doing reporting until the family got a bit older and I could take on something more. Instead, now I find myself in a senior leadership role, leading a team, with so many opportunities. There's no way I'm turning back now, I can just see so many different things I can do.

* The My Mentor program is a mentoring initiative offered to women at VicRoads, empowering them to take charge of their career development.

A brighter future

On a personal front, another shift has had a profound influence – Wayne chose to quit his job, start his own business and is now a stay-at-home dad. This is a time of huge learning and adjustment for him, says Paula. He’s learning everything from how to use the washing machine, to how to handle Aidan when he’s having a meltdown and kicking and screaming on the floor.

And, of course, Aidan is growing up. He is making friends at school, and with a full-time aide by his side, can go to a regular school without too many dramas in the classroom. Paula’s extensive early intervention, especially with the physiotherapy needed to improve Aidan’s walking gait, means that much of the hard work is now behind her. As Paula explains:

Now Aidan is at the age where he understands that he has to do some walking, he has to do some trampolining; he knows he’s got to stand on this special step to straighten his muscles. It’s not so much about me telling him to do something now, he is aware that he’s got to get through those things to help himself.

It’s not all perfect, of course, and there are still very few women in permanent senior leadership roles. The power of the status quo should not be underestimated and it can take years to shift a conservative organisation with pockets of resistance. Appealing to managers to change well-entrenched behaviours, thinking, values and beliefs takes disciplined, sustained leadership and unwavering commitment at all levels.

Nevertheless, for Paula, life has changed in extraordinary ways: ‘Twelve months ago, I never thought I’d be leading a team, be able to support my entire family and feel really good about what I’m doing at work.’



Natasha Kennedy

Natasha, environmental officer, is a proud Wotjobaluk woman and has been working at VicRoads Western Region, based in Ballarat, since 2007. Natasha was the first Indigenous environmental officer employed at VicRoads and, in this role, she ensures that VicRoads considers all cultural issues.

She also provides invaluable knowledge and experience in working with local Indigenous communities. Natasha's responsibilities include being a key contact for cultural heritage in the region, vegetation management, pest plant and pest animal management, working with community groups to achieve positive environmental outcomes, and determining environmental risks associated with works on Victoria's roads.

The advocate

Natasha Kennedy

While most of VicRoads is focused on implementing its diversity and inclusion strategy through a focus on gender targets, people in the small Indigenous community at VicRoads are reminding everyone that diversity is broader than just gender, and are quietly getting on with their jobs without fanfare. One Indigenous woman is proving that anyone can be a leader, anytime, anywhere, without being in a position of formal authority. That woman is Natasha Kennedy, Indigenous environmental officer for the western region, based in Ballarat.

At first glance, Natasha doesn't strike you as someone from an Indigenous family. Growing up in Ballarat, she didn't feel like she was different to her local friends, or out of place at school. She was lucky enough to have had an unremarkable childhood, without the stereotypical bullying or racism that other Indigenous children experienced, because, she surmises, her skin colour looks more Anglo Saxon. 'I grew up just like all the other local Ballarat kids,' she recalls. Her Indigenous heritage, at that stage of her life, was known and acknowledged but under her radar. However, she is a Wotjobaluk woman and her country is the Horsham area west of Ballarat, where her father's family comes from.

Awakening the sleeping giant

Natasha's Indigenous and spiritual awakening began in her late teenage years and continued into her twenties. Her father's community in

Horsham joined with the broader Indigenous people in the Wimmera to fight for native title recognition. Her father's family came from a long line of Richard Kennedys, so they were well-known and respected in the community: 'If you say "Richard Kennedy" up there, people know who you are because they know the family ties and connections.'

After a long and hard-fought legal battle lasting ten years, native title was granted in 2005 to the Wotjobaluk, Jaadwa, Jadawadjali, Wergaia and Jupagalk peoples. It was the first successful native title claim in Victoria.

Natasha would accompany her father on the two-hour road trips from Ballarat to Horsham and back again throughout this time. During these trips she became exposed to the struggle for native title and emerged with an understanding of the traditions and heritage of her people and of her identity as a Wotjobaluk woman. Her awakening as a Wotjobaluk woman had begun.

She commenced her first community leadership role soon after, convening the Winyula Council, formed as part of a cooperative management agreement to provide advice and make recommendations to the minister about Crown Land in the agreement area.

Career and connection to country unite

Her connection to country was further strengthened a few years later, through two seemingly random spiritual encounters.

After completing high school Natasha had no clear career focus or direction. Her mother was browsing through a university course handbook and stumbled upon the Diploma of Natural Resource Management. She thought Natasha would enjoy a job that involved being outdoors and encouraged her to apply. Natasha thought, 'Why not?' and enrolled in the two-year diploma.

They were the best two years of my life because we were with like-minded people. We had a mixture of mature-aged and younger people straight out of school like I was, and it was just the right mix. We all got on so well. It was really great. That's when I realised it was what I wanted to do, to work in the environment.

After graduating, her dream was to find a role at Parks Victoria, but jobs were scarce and highly contested. Eventually an Indigenous-

identified position of field services officer became available through the Parks Victoria Indigenous Employment Program. She applied for this role, completed the interview and selection process, and got the position. She was thrilled. She was responsible for maintaining the park facilities including camp sites and other visitor facilities, protecting cultural sites, pest-plant and animal management and fire management, which required her to be on call during the fire season. She worked mainly at Mount Arapiles-Toooan State Park, a world-renowned rock-climbing park, not that she had the slightest interest in climbing rocks. She remembers copping a lot of laughs from the climbers when she'd say to them, 'Why would I climb it when I can actually walk or drive up there?'

She learned the location and significance of sacred sites, scar trees, scatter sites and so on from a distant relative and some other Indigenous staff that worked in the Grampians region. This was her first real exposure to cultural heritage management and she was hooked. This exposure altered the course of her career in ways not evident back then.

It was at one of these sacred sites, Mount Talbot, that Natasha had her first significant spiritual experience – an encounter with Bunjil, the creator spirit who appears as an eagle:

One day, I was walking up to the top of Mount Talbot. Not many people go there, apart from the occasional rock climbers, so it's really overgrown. I was on this rocky area and I totally lost the track. I thought to myself I'd be a bit silly and just ask, 'Bunjil, if you want me to find the top, send me a sign. Show me a way.' I was looking to the left, looking to the right. Then I looked up and this wedge-tailed eagle flew right in, looked right at me and flew off in a certain direction. So I walked in that direction and found the path again.

Her encounter 'freaked her out a bit', she recalls, but it was repeated a short time later:

Another time, I nearly had a car accident. I took a corner too fast, skidded, and by the time I straightened up I was a bit shaken. Then I looked up and there was an eagle sitting on the fence post in front of me, sort of looking at me like, 'You'll be right. Don't worry.' So I thought, 'Wow, OK. Maybe I'm being watched over.'

Bunjil is an important spiritual figure in Natasha's community. They believe that if you see a wedge-tailed eagle in the morning it's good luck and if you see it in the afternoon it's a warning. Given her experiences of being watched over by eagles on two occasions, she now pays more attention to that belief too:

Like, 'Yeah, there's a wedge-tailed eagle. Wait, what time is it? Is it OK? If it's the afternoon, what do I need to worry about? If it's the morning, then today's going to be a good day.'

The call of home

Her Parks Victoria job took her to Horsham, closer to her traditional country. Her core family, however, was back in Ballarat and she found the separation from them difficult and lonely. She also didn't like being on call during the fire season, being unable to take holidays in summer, or attending fires, as she explains, 'I wasn't very fond of flames coming at me – I'm not an adrenaline junkie.'

Who needs a career counsellor when you have a mother like Natasha's scanning the job advertisements for you? Her mother read an advertisement for a job as Indigenous environmental officer at VicRoads in Ballarat and suggested Natasha apply. With her homesickness calling her back, she decided to give it a go.

That was nine years ago. It was a massive learning curve, she recalls, with a huge backlog of work to get through – work that was totally new to her. From doing the hard physical work herself out in the open spaces, suddenly she was in an office planning and supervising the work of others. She shared the office space with a colleague, Frank Carland, who had only started six months before her and who she describes as a great mentor to her. Natasha felt welcomed and supported by Frank and the team from day one:

Having someone like Frank, the team that I was in and the environment of this office was really great for a young woman because it was really supportive – no question was stupid. Everyone was there to help, which was great. We're very relaxed, very friendly. It's one of those sorts of places where you feel like you're family. If someone retires or leaves it's really sad because you're going to miss them.

It was clear in the first year that she was working at a higher level

than the Grade 2 job classification. Her managers applied for a reclassification to Grade 3 for her, but it was initially knocked back because, she was told, no one had ever applied for a reclassification with less than one year's experience in the job. She jokingly said she called on friends in high places, because a number of senior managers in head office took on her case, so the second time around the reclassification bid was successful.

As an Indigenous person, Natasha didn't experience any different treatment, probably because she is not a stereotypical Indigenous woman in appearance. This can create its own challenges, however, especially when she occasionally overhears remarks or comments about Indigenous people from

people who don't realise she is Indigenous. These are the times she is proud to step up and say, 'I am Indigenous,' much to their surprise. 'These are the times she is proud to step up and say, 'I am Indigenous,' much to their surprise.'

Being a woman in a blokey environment has also had its moments, and she remembers being automatically considered to be Frank's secretary when she went out on field trips, until people got to know her:

If I go out by myself I don't get that comment so much because they assume I am obviously capable. But if I'm there with Frank, who's older than I am, they tend to refer to me as Frank's 'offsider' or 'secretary'.

Frank, of course, has always backed her, making it clear to these old-style blokes that she's there on her own merits with her own considerable expertise.

Learning to lead

Leadership is often attributed to a position – it is usually hierarchical and denotes a level of seniority – a position title may include the word 'leader' or 'manager' and involve leading or managing a team of direct reports.

Natasha doesn't lead a team of direct reports. She doesn't have the word 'leader' in her title. As a Grade 3 she is not part of the designated

‘leadership team’ hierarchy. She does not necessarily aspire to hold a leadership position and describes herself as ‘not very ambitious, quite content to have a nice, solid job’. But she is a Kennedy, after all, and perhaps leadership is in her blood. In any case, she seems to have a natural instinct for identifying and taking on leadership challenges with humility and enthusiasm.

Other Indigenous colleagues, whether they are road workers, office staff, surveillance staff, or call centre staff, report to their own supervisors or team leaders. Yet, hearing Natasha’s story, it became clear that she leads when it matters. She has found opportunities to lead on many levels – from personal leadership, to leading Indigenous initiatives within VicRoads and leading in the broader government agenda:

1. Personal leadership

Personal leadership is about the ability to motivate yourself to follow your passions and reach your goals.

As Natasha spoke about her professional development, it became clear that, for her, personal leadership is a continuous process. Pursuing her passion for cultural heritage management, she completed a Certificate IV in Aboriginal Cultural Heritage at La Trobe University. She can now assess the impact of works on cultural heritage sites and provide valuable advice to co-workers on processes that will increase the acceptance rate of proposals for works programs.

That desire to continually learn and develop spilled over in other ways too, not directly related to her job:

I constantly feel like I’m always doing something, learning something new, trying to do different things. There was a course that I wanted to do because I have an interest in animals and zookeeping, but it was in Sydney. I thought, ‘With the 44/52 annual leave policy, I reckon I can do this,’ so I did. I crazily flew up to Sydney every fortnight and got my qualification.

2. Leading Indigenous initiatives at VicRoads

Natasha has a strong track record of stepping up to the leadership challenge, seizing opportunities to raise awareness and respect for Aboriginal culture and heritage whenever they arise. Early in her

career at VicRoads, Natasha heard that the executive team from head office would be visiting. She used this opportunity to give them the Acknowledgement of Country on their arrival and was the first person to perform this ritual in the traditional language.

She has organised and led staff training for Aboriginal cultural heritage site identification in the western region, which were run with the local Indigenous communities to raise the awareness of cultural heritage sites. She is on the VicRoads Indigenous Staff Committee and has assisted in organising and running events like a morning tea during NAIDOC Week in the Ballarat office. She has also been on the selection panel for the Indigenous Secondary School Scholarships.

More recently, in 2015, Natasha assisted in organising the annual VicRoads Indigenous Staff Conference along with the Indigenous employment recruitment consultant at VicRoads, Chaise Egan. These annual conferences enable Indigenous staff to meet and support each other around specific workplace issues or challenges and undertake training. Natasha saw the opportunity to use the conference in bigger and more significant ways – as an occasion to explore Indigenous stories and experience their culture together. So she helped to organise a visit to the Aboriginal rock art sites at the Grampians. Through this initiative, Natasha believes, the Indigenous community at VicRoads felt energised by their common heritage, linked by a common purpose and bonded like a family.

Natasha has also stepped up to the role of mentor for an Indigenous environmental officer. She has had the pleasure of seeing this young woman's career take off, from her humble beginning as a trainee to her recent appointment to a Grade 3 role.

3. Broader leadership opportunities

Natasha is also developing quite an external profile outside VicRoads. If you look up the website 'aLife', an online resource for schoolchildren to explore potential career paths, you'll find Natasha's story. She is also featured on the website for the Karreeta Yirramboi, the Victorian Public Sector Aboriginal Employment Action Plan, aimed at increasing Aboriginal participation in the Victorian public sector workforce.

Finding her voice

Natasha's agenda for the coming year is impressive. She is passionate about increasing opportunities for Indigenous employment. Whilst she supports VicRoads' gender equality strategy as the first step in implementing its diversity and inclusion strategy, she believes Indigenous programs should not be compromised. Cutting budgets for programs such as the Indigenous Staff Conference, for instance, also doesn't seem to make sense in an organisation committed to creating a diverse and inclusive workforce.

Unlike the gender diversity strategy, which required extensive resources and budgets for the development of new initiatives, Indigenous employment programs such as Indigenous secondary school and tertiary scholarships, and Indigenous traineeships, are already in place and have been supported by VicRoads for many years. Natasha believes it would be simple for VicRoads to enhance its commitment to Aboriginal employment and development initiatives simultaneously with its gender diversity strategy.

Natasha also champions several initiatives to enhance career paths and development opportunities for Indigenous staff. She believes opportunities for secondments, shadowing and short-term assignments that are available in head office should be possible in smaller regional offices too, even though the number of opportunities may be limited. Take her own job as an example – why not use it as a back-fill opportunity for another Indigenous staff member when she takes leave, thereby providing a valuable developmental experience, which will build skills and prepare others for future roles?

The Ballarat office has just initiated its first women's networking morning tea and Natasha is looking forward to the My Mentor program commencing there.

Natasha is a great example of a leader without the title. She demonstrates time and again that leadership is a daily activity, not a defined position, that it is something anyone can do, anytime and anywhere.



Zara Fox

Zara Fox is the principal lawyer Commercial Roads at VicRoads (and was the acting director Commercial Roads between November 2015 and September 2016). Commercial Roads manages the road infrastructure public-private partnership contracts and provides strategic procurement advice to VicRoads' operational divisions. Zara provides oversight of the contract administration of Victoria's private road infrastructure contracts, manages negotiations and disputes with the road concessionaires, and provides strategic advice to other government agencies in the development of major transport infrastructure projects. Zara lives with her three boys in Elwood, Melbourne.

A labour of love

Zara Fox

How do you decide the future for your young children after the shocking and sudden death of your husband? Is it better to sacrifice a budding career that has huge promise so you can care for them full-time, or to pursue your career even more vigorously in order to provide for their future? Do you succumb to the views of critics who see your actions as egotistical, or defy them with courage and conviction and go it alone?

Zara has worked tirelessly in establishing her legal career in the ten years since her husband John's death. While her career decision has come at a personal cost and sacrifice, in terms of the time she needed to spend away from her boys, it is her career that ultimately underpins their security and future opportunities.

The irresistible tug of law

Zara is someone who has always had an enquiring mind, strong views and a passion to discuss the big issues. The seeds were sown in her early years, where she was entertained by robust discussions around the family's kitchen table between her uncle, a partner with the law firm Mallesons (now King & Wood Mallesons) and her grandmother, who ran her own law practice:

Many a family lunch revolved around banter between the two, as my grandmother tried to prise out of her son the latest gossip in the legal profession only to get a witty evasion back along the lines of, 'Well,

you know they say Alan Bond could sell dreams to bankers – but he can't sell them to the lawyers!'

The enjoyment of such discussions came back into focus in her mid-twenties when she was at a career standstill and understood she needed to take a different path. After graduating with a commerce degree and completing several years' experience as a successful communications officer at a top university, she realised a career in communications was no longer providing her with the challenges and inspiration she was seeking.

She was inspired by the way her uncle and grandmother were so energised and challenged by their careers. Both were highly intelligent and engaging individuals, and it was impossible not to be drawn into the enthusiasm they had for their profession and to feel that it offered a window to the world of current affairs, politics and the way in which global economy operates. A degree in law seemed a pretty strong fit with these interests; it presented a great intellectual challenge and Zara knew she'd have the support of her family. Knowing lecture and study timetables can be more flexible than work hours, she chose to go back to university while planning her family.

Two years into her law degree, her husband John was offered a role in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates and the family relocated. Zara was able to work as a paralegal for the global law firm Shearman & Sterling LLP (a top tier energy project finance firm) and she loved the work. Their three boys were born in Abu Dhabi.

A difficult choice

Zara, John and the boys returned to Australia after four years and purchased a home in beautiful Woodend, a ninety-minute drive north of Melbourne. Eight days after moving into their new home, the unthinkable happened. John unexpectedly died. At the age of thirty-two, when most women's work and personal lives are soaring to great heights, Zara's came tumbling down. She went through the shock and grief of losing the love of her life, her greatest supporter and the person with whom she had planned to live the rest of her life. This was the lowest point in her life:

I felt my identity had been stripped away by the death of my husband.

My rock and the man who believed in my capabilities and potential, and through whose eyes I had been a wonderful mother, was gone.

Zara was in the final year of her law degree and was now suddenly a sole parent. She had to make some stark choices about her career and family life. Should she quit her studies and shelve her dreams of pursuing a career in law to devote herself fully to caring for the boys? Should she return to the communications career she had already established, which would offer her more work-life flexibility, but less income and challenge? Or should she continue pursuing a career with a large corporate law firm, which would be more rewarding for her, but jeopardise her work-life balance?

After wrestling with these choices she ultimately decided to continue on the path she and John had agreed on before his death, and pursued her law career. Besides, as the sole provider for her family, a legal career would provide her with the financial security she needed, now more than ever.

Zara encountered the harshest criticism from one of the places where she needed the most support – John’s parents. They strongly urged her to quit her career and become a full-time carer until the boys were older. She describes her feelings at the time:

It was put to me that pursuing a career in corporate law was not an appropriate career for my circumstances and that I could only be doing it to serve my own ego, which I seemingly wanted to put ahead of the increased needs of my young family. I found this, and other critical opinions on the steps I was taking, very disempowering. While on one level I always recognised that these statements were harsh and were not a fair representation of my motivations, they did lead me to question the type of person I was. I didn’t feel like a good mother for making the decision I did. And, consequently, I didn’t feel like a good person. These types of criticisms left me feeling bound to perform and doomed to fail in both roles as professional and mother.

Her feelings were compounded when her oldest son was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes and the management of his healthcare, which was of paramount importance, had to be managed along with her competing career demands.

She ploughed on, graduated in early 2008 with a Bachelor of Laws

(Honours) and immediately joined the graduate program at Corrs Chambers Westgarth, an upper mid-tier law firm. They were tough times and it was incredibly difficult to keep on top of work. It was a three-hour commute from home to work each day and money was tight:

With Isaac, my youngest, constantly sick, I bit the bullet and spent the money on a full-time nanny. After I paid her salary out of my graduate salary I had \$6 a week left. This meant we were living off John's limited super payout.

A global journey of growth and career development

This financial situation was not sustainable and she needed to make a change. In 2009, she moved back to Abu Dhabi with the boys, accepting a position in the project finance team of Shearman & Sterling, her previous employer. This was an exciting and challenging role that would not usually have been available to lateral recruits, but was offered to Zara based on her previous paralegal work with the firm. The move had a number of benefits, both from a career and a family perspective. The year 2008 was a time of great uncertainty in Melbourne with the financial downturn. The number of major infrastructure projects that normally flowed Corrs' way slowed to a trickle and the firm began to downsize. The writing was on the wall – the firm would be unlikely to offer her the same development opportunities as she could expect in flourishing times. Abu Dhabi's construction industry, on the other hand, continued to boom. Also, the financial benefits of a higher, tax-free salary and the availability of lower-cost home help would provide her family with financial stability.

Nevertheless, moving halfway across the world, to a conservative Muslim country, while supporting a young family without a husband, was a daunting and isolating experience that brought its own set of challenges, both at the governmental administrative level and on a family/community-based support level. Zara was also conscious that it presented a limited window of opportunity. If she stayed long enough in the Middle East she would have a strong project record on her cv and could secure her family's financial future, but if she stayed too long she would effectively be shut out from re-entering the Australian

legal sector, a relatively closed business market where client contacts are considered paramount.

The imposter syndrome

Abu Dhabi provides excellent opportunities for career growth and development if you are a young, hard-working and highly ambitious person with a single-minded focus on the job. This work environment, however, was far from family-friendly. She found herself working alongside the UK's brightest and most self-assured young Oxford lawyers, with track records as 'winners' in their school years, in their law degrees and in the elite legal firm recruitment process. Zara would compare herself to them and conclude she couldn't measure up, particularly given they were unencumbered by family responsibilities and had undertaken two years of articles, compared to her eight months in the graduate program in Australia. Imposter syndrome was the inevitable outcome – a term used to describe the fear of high-achievers that they are not deserving of their roles and will be exposed as 'frauds'.

As welcoming as her colleagues were, her insecurities were something she felt she could not discuss until she was so overwhelmed by the expectations of the role and her belief that everyone else was performing it better, that she almost quit. Fortunately,

the managing partner convinced her to stay. 'The key,' he advised, 'is just to keep developing.'

As valuable as this advice was, she came to realise that the firm had only one inflexible model of developing lawyers – based on putting in hard work and long hours in the office and working with unpredictable travel schedules. That approach may be fine for young, single lawyers, but the system was not geared to support anyone in different circumstances, such as parents with family commitments. While Zara was very busy and able to generate a steady supply of work from

'She came to realise that the firm had only one inflexible model of developing lawyers – based on putting in hard work and long hours in the office and working with unpredictable travel schedules.'

the firm's government clients, she discovered she was being overlooked for plum projects that required long hours and extensive travel because partners were making assumptions and unilateral decisions about her availability to do the hard yards, given her sole parent status. Being denied such roles meant her development and career prospects would be limited. These days we call it 'unconscious bias' – a form of unwitting discrimination where people make automatic assumptions about a person or group based on stereotypical views, and deny them opportunities accordingly.

While difficult to address head-on, when Zara identified that her career path was not clear at Shearman & Sterling, she elected to take up a legal secondment role with the government organization Mubadala Development Company and, subsequent to that, with the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company. Both were clients with which she had already developed strong working relationships. These in-house roles allowed Zara to continue to progress her technical and negotiation skills in addition to gaining greater insight into the commercial and operational imperatives of her key clients. Her career blossomed.

Coming home

After four and a half years, Zara and the boys returned to Australia, as planned:

It was always the aim to put myself into a position where it was financially viable to come back and give my boys the sense that Australia was their home, and allow them to have those cultural references and the lifestyle that goes with being Australian.

Reverse culture shock affected them all in varying degrees. By then, the boys were older – eleven, nine and seven. The boys had started school in Abu Dhabi and, although her two youngest boys fitted straight back in to Australian society with little difficulty, her oldest son found it more difficult to say goodbye to his friendship group and community, and to find his fit in his new school, experiencing a sense of social isolation. Zara also had to adjust to the difficulty of losing home help, and had to juggle long hours at work and bringing up the boys without a life partner to share the load. Her mother and aunt were a great support when available. However, as both worked

long hours in their own challenging full-time roles, they were simply not able to provide backup during those important working hours.

Zara recently asked her boys if they are happy to have returned to Australia, and without hesitation they agreed. They are now settled with new friends and good schools, and they talk about the freedom they have here and the opportunity to play sport in the community, a prospect they were denied in Abu Dhabi.

Redefining flexibility

Corrs offered Zara a role back in Melbourne as a senior associate, the step below partner, recognising her overseas experience. However, she struggled to fit into the stereotypical expectation of an aspiring partner at Corrs. Her diversity of experience did not sit comfortably with the specialist nature of the work at Corrs. Also, after a four-year absence she had to quickly re-establish a client base from scratch. There were clear messages that the track to partnership would be paved with long hours and a single-minded dedication to achieving rigorous career milestones. Zara did not feel compelled to work that way. As for flexible work practices, almost overwhelmingly she found that the only way law firms recognised how to support diversity for mothers was through offering part-time work. She didn't need part-time work; she needed flexible hours in a full-time capacity. She realised it was time to move.

The road to VicRoads

Zara was attracted to the opportunity to work at VicRoads as principal lawyer for Commercial Roads for several reasons. An in-house role suited her, as it would utilise the broader skill base she developed in the Middle East. Commercial Roads offered a project management / contract administration role that required strong relationship-building and negotiation skills and an understanding of the underlying risk structure to major infrastructure public-private partnerships (PPPs) – it was a role that complemented her existing skill sets.

She also highly respected the managers who interviewed her and to whom she subsequently would report. She felt she would be contributing to something worthwhile and be able to balance her career and

family life – at last.

Zara commenced at VicRoads six months after the appointment of the CEO, John Merritt. She remembers the first week she started, when he talked about his commitment to overcoming an entrenched culture of bullying in VicRoads, and his intention to introduce diversity initiatives to support women’s careers. ‘I thought, “What have I walked into? We’ve got a culture of bullying and women need to be focused on? This is a problem.”’

But she has observed first hand that his commitment to diversity was more than lip service. She notices that he encourages women to speak up in meetings, actively listens when women contribute and follows up on issues they have raised. His open-door policy is genuine. Zara has personally experienced this commitment to the development of women’s careers at VicRoads by participating in leadership programs to encourage diversity and taking up an opportunity to attend an international task force in Paris in July 2016.

A new, flexible life

Zara believes there is still key work to be done in changing the mindset of some old-school managers in VicRoads, some of whom still don’t see the gains in supporting flexible work structures and adopting collaborative leadership styles. When she hears some comments, she realises biases and stereotyping still need to be called out – comments like: ‘We try to support women but women with young families take the mickey,’ or, ‘We offer some flexibility and they take a mile,’ or, ‘They take off early and they don’t come back and there’s always a child who’s sick.’

She recognises that adopting a flexible and collaborative leadership style has its challenges for managers, particularly when you have a small team with everyone on a different work schedule. You need to lead through empowerment and trust, be innovative and responsive to resolve dilemmas around when and how to conduct team meetings, and to adopt different communication styles, she firmly believes.

Flexibility doesn’t mean working less hours, if anything, she feels at times she works too much. Often she will be on her laptop at 6.00 am or 10.00 pm based on the needs of the job and her family routine.

However, there is a strong pay-off too. She no longer has to feel guilty or non-compliant in her office attendance when stepping out to attend a school interview with one of her sons, or taking her oldest son to the many medical appointments that his diabetes requires. She also generally has her weekends free – another bonus.

As for Zara's career direction, she has stepped up quickly since joining VicRoads, acting in the role of director Commercial Roads since November 2015. In the past, she's had to fight for career opportunities, whereas now, at VicRoads, she feels her capabilities are being recognised and she is being offered opportunities without having to robustly make the case for why she is able to fulfil a role.





VicRoads has a history of employing strong women.



Jacqui Sampson

Jacqui is acting as the director customer services and has worked at VicRoads for fifteen years. Jacqui's areas of expertise include business improvement, project management, communications/stakeholder engagement and operational management. This experience helps her lead teams in the delivery of successful business outcomes and be an integral part of expert project teams. Jacqui is particularly experienced in the registration and licensing, and road safety portfolios, with a strength in, and genuine love of, people leadership. Jacqui's greatest loves are her family and friends, especially her boys, Luke and Joshua. Her other great love is sport, especially netball, surf lifesaving and football.

The road to leadership

Jacqui Sampson

Jacqui's wide smile, exuberance and boundless energy were the first things that struck me when she walked into the room. Then her passion for her work, belief in people and her no-nonsense approach helped me realise how she became such a success at VicRoads.

Growing up at VicRoads

'I've grown up at VicRoads,' was the first thing Jacqui said to me. In her fifteen years at VicRoads, she has gotten married, made some great friends, had two beautiful boys, seen them grow up into healthy and happy kids, and has carved out a successful career.

Jacqui was an arts/commerce graduate and cut her teeth across a range of departments through the graduate rotation program, including Registration and Licensing, Road Safety, Legal Services, and Media and Communications, as well as doing the hard yards out in the regions. She has worked on several high-profile road safety projects too. That wasn't enough for Jacqui, who continued her studies whilst working and was supported by VicRoads to return to university and complete her law degree part-time over five years.

One very significant work highlight for Jacqui was being part of the project team that delivered all three phases of the Graduated Licensing System (GLS) Project. This initiative transformed the way VicRoads delivered licence testing in Victoria by providing new drivers with a structured, safe progression through licensing stages based

on their experience and maturity.

It was really important for me to be working on something I truly believed in and that I felt would have – and has – some really great road safety outcomes for our young novice drivers.

Her pregnancies didn't slow her down at all. It's a testament to her passion for the project that she worked and travelled extensively right up to the last couple of weeks before the birth of her first child, Luke, who was born two days short of the project's main implementation date of 1 July 2008 – she calls him her 'GLS baby' in memory of the project.

Jacqui laughs at the recollection of making it onto Victorian radio at the time – the driving instructor industry was very vocal and complained on Neil Mitchell's program about VicRoads allowing a pregnant woman who would be finishing soon to work on such a high profile project. Clearly, some people in the community believed being pregnant denied you the right to work on important initiatives and she should step down into a lower-profile, less mind-taxing job.

Jacqui says that during this period she was very fortunate to have a supportive line manager and director who advocated for her during this time of public criticism. Her director also organised flexible working conditions so she could return part-time in 2009 after her first maternity leave.

I'm using the word fortunate because I know others haven't necessarily had similar stories about their return to work. If I'd worked for someone else at the time, I probably wouldn't have had the opportunities that I've had today, which, rightly or wrongly, shouldn't determine your career.

She contributed to this 'lucky situation' by staying in touch with her director while on maternity leave. She was kept in the loop about her readiness to return to work, the type of work she was seeking and the balance she wished to strike between her work and family responsibilities. This enabled a planned re-entry on terms that suited Jacqui and matched the business's needs.

A working mum's life

Jacqui 'leaned back' in her career for around sixteen months before

her next child, Joshua, was born. She took on project roles, first as road safety regulations communications coordinator and then as frontline strategic operations coordinator. Both roles were interesting, but not as challenging as she would have liked had she been totally career-focused and not had the priority of small children eagerly waiting for her at the end of the day. She felt a bit like a hamster on a wheel at this time, she says, going through the motions of work, but being a part-timer, not expecting more challenge. Part-time senior roles, especially those involving the management of teams, just weren't in the realm of possibility in those days.

Part-time work can also be a lonely and hard road to travel, and part-timers might feel a sense of isolation from their team. Jacqui would work as hard as possible, juggling the needs of young children, racing around doing drop-offs and pick-ups, sometimes working through a lunch break or missing important corporate communications sessions in order to get out the door on time and working late in the evenings after the boys were in bed. Friendly chats in the corridor or a leisurely lunch with work colleagues were indulgences she often could not afford. It was not an unwillingness to be engaged with the workforce, but a necessity to complete her work before the looming, inflexible end-of-day deadline came around.

Conflicts around her responsibilities as a mother and as a professional leader were usually managed. However, there was one time she recalls when she didn't get it right. It still makes her wince when she remembers it:

I made a mistake once where I didn't attend Luke's kinder breakfast (one of the first of many special days held at kinder). My mother-in-law went, so he didn't miss out by any means, but I attended a meeting at work because I thought I had to be there. I was sitting in the meeting and realised it wasn't that important and I didn't need to be there. The kinder teacher said to me later, 'Jacqui, Luke was so disappointed that you didn't make the breakfast.' Never again will I make that mistake again and I haven't missed one of either boy's special days since.

Most people at work accommodated her part-time working arrangements, but in every organisation there are always a few people who

just cannot adapt and she had to learn to be more forthright about her needs.

Some teams I was a part of really struggled trying to accommodate a part-time team member and meetings were perceived to be difficult to schedule, despite the fact that I predominantly worked three or four days during my part-time career. One team member consistently couldn't get the fact that I didn't work Fridays and continued to schedule Friday meetings. One day, I quite strongly responded to the usual/regular comment of, 'Oh, you don't work Fridays?' and said, 'Well actually, you've got four other days of the week that I work to have that meeting.' The message finally got through.

Clarifying her needs and managing work and family boundaries became easier with experience. Initially, she assumed managers understood her needs and circumstances, but soon she realised it was unfair to expect a manager who hasn't necessarily had to face the challenges of the juggling act to be conscious of her specific needs. So she began opening up more about her challenges in balancing work and family commitments, clarifying the reasons she couldn't attend early-morning meetings, why she had to leave promptly at a specific time each day, or why a particular deadline that is reasonable for a full-time person is unrealistic for a part-timer like her. 'Once you've explained it once or twice, you let your work do the talking and your outputs speak for themselves.'

Dark times

Jacqui's career was far from an easy ride. She reflects on what she describes as the 'dark times in her beloved Registration and Licensing Department', where, in her opinion, previous senior managers believed in ruling by title and authority to the detriment of the staff they were privileged to lead. She remembers one particular manager (who is no longer at VicRoads):

...who at their worst would rip shreds of confidence off people, leaving quite competent people doubting their abilities and with a genuine sense of loss of direction. I feel very strongly about the fact that no one has the right to take someone's confidence away and affect them both on a professional and personal level. In fact, a leader's duty is to

do the opposite and provide a supportive environment where people can be the best they can be.

Whilst I was not as directly affected as some, I reckon it probably took me six months to recover from having any contact with that manager and I ended up going into another business area just to get away. I'll never make that mistake again. I should have voiced my opinions a lot sooner and a lot louder because there were a lot of people suffering at that time. I also learned a very valuable lesson about the direct impact your actions can have on other people and what true leadership is about.

Her transition back to work in 2011, after her younger son Joshua was born, was particularly difficult. Call it bad timing or bad luck, but being away on leave during a major organisation restructure meant Jacqui was not well-placed when jobs were assigned. She was required to reapply for her job and, for one of the first times in her career, she missed out. She was devastated, felt lost and her self-confidence took a massive hit. She went into a holding pattern for about three years, taking on the role of business improvement manager and, later, a senior policy officer role. The managers and the teams were great, she recalls, but neither of these jobs fuelled a burning ambition in her and it took some time for her true passion and confidence to return.

Learning to lead

A career-defining moment came in 2014, when she successfully applied for the role of manager medical and driver review. This was her first role leading a team of thirty-five people and represented a clear step up, away from the support roles and specialist project assignments that had defined her career to date.

Late in 2015, she took on a second leadership role as acting senior contact centre manager and, in 2016, reverted to working full-time. As a leader of almost 200 staff across two contact centres, Jacqui's challenge is to drive a new vision and transform the call centre culture, whilst managing operational performance and a large budget. Even a respected leader with decades of experience would describe managing a large, geographically-spread team as a significant challenge.

It's been my greatest career high and, at times, it's probably also

been my biggest career low. I've learned quickly that leadership can be a really lonely place. Sometimes you feel like you're failing, then you receive some positive feedback from staff and realise that yes, it's working, people are getting the message and they're on board. Ten steps forward, five back, and then ten steps forward again – it's all about the small gains over a sustained time.

Jacqui is not a technical expert in either of her leadership roles – when she started she had little direct experience or awareness of what it was really like dealing with stressed clients and stakeholders, and making decisions about motor vehicle licensing that could significantly affect their quality of life.

However, Jacqui is a person who sees opportunities rather than obstacles and she shaped her leadership style accordingly, by listening carefully, learning from her staff and respectfully challenging the way things are done. It often takes a newcomer to ask the seemingly naïve, but important questions that can transform mindsets and accelerate change:

In order to move us forward, I had to be respectful of past decisions made, but also challenge the teams to understand why we've completed something a certain way for such a long period of time. The why around what we are doing is just so important, as is what we, as a team, are collectively working towards. What is our main objective?

In a very short time, Jacqui developed a great respect for the work of her teams:

The medical review space is an extremely sensitive area. A fitness-to-drive decision around whether someone should continue to be licensed has massive ramifications on a person. So we need to be really confident and informed in our decision-making, and balance this with empathy in the delivery of the decision. That's no easy task for our staff. So what we're asking them to do is actually, in my opinion, one of the most complex things we could ask of anyone.

Creating a mindset shift within the contact centres meant something different – it was about improving the balance between operational performance and investing in people. Jacqui understood that the leadership style and messaging had a significant bearing on how the contact centres would reach their future objectives. From

day one, she observed the need to change the leadership style to be more people-centred, in what is a highly measured and, at times, quite relentless, environment. Her leadership priority became clear: to create a motivating and inspiring work culture where people feel they have a voice, where they have some autonomy, where they can respectfully challenge stakeholders and be in an environment where they enjoy coming to work – one that fosters a team approach.

Investing in a leadership style based on mutual respect, trust and autonomy is key, but it's a massive challenge. It is exhausting and all consuming, and she says she is absolutely spent at the end of the week. It sometimes takes all of Jacqui's optimism to look beyond the difficulties and see the positive changes occurring, and she is grateful for the support and trust her leaders have placed in her.

She received the best piece of advice from John Merritt, the CEO, around leadership fatigue. He counselled her to do something that makes her happy in her role each day. She reflected on this advice and found that she was enormously motivated and re-energised by the informal conversations she has with her staff in the tearooms, or when walking the floor, and so she builds this activity into her weekly routine. Sometimes the smallest conversations can be the most rewarding:

One of the customer service staff in the call centre in Ballarat absolutely made my day, if not my week. She said, 'Jacqui, I just wanted to introduce myself. I want you to know that I am really excited about the cultural changes here in the contact centre and that I really want to help.' That was fantastic. Then she sent me a lovely email as well. I can't wait to get her involved in the changes now.

Jacqui is very proud of where her leadership team is heading, while recognising that culture change requires steadfast leadership commitment and it's a journey that doesn't happen overnight.

We are two physical contact centres but one team now. We're able to have respectful discussions and challenge decisions, but when we walk out we speak as one team and support each other. Each individual is developing their sense of awareness around the importance of their role and the privilege it is to be in a leadership position.

A woman in a man's world

Carving out a successful career as a woman in a male-dominated organisation can sometimes seem like walking a tightrope – you have to have a determined mindset, but not be seen as inflexible; be confident and assertive, but not come across as pushy; be empathetic, but not weak; be innovative, but not ostracise the old guard; be responsive to your family needs, but not be seen as uncommitted to a career.

Yet Jacqui believes her gender has been largely irrelevant in her career success. Male or female, she believes the same opportunities would have come her way regardless.

Today, we've got four generations in the workforce. This is probably the most diverse workforce we're going to see. Is it challenging working with some older styles of management? Yes, especially where maybe they're really resistant to change. But it's not a gender issue. It's more that they are really quite change or risk averse.

It's definitely a great time to be a woman at VicRoads right now. Recently, Jacqui travelled with Helen Lindner, director practice standards and solutions, to represent VicRoads internationally at conferences in Spain and Sweden. Helen and Jacqui also completed a study tour of other roads agencies in the Netherlands and the UK. Whilst in London they also visited with Transport for London, together with Zara Fox, acting director Commercial Roads. Three women from VicRoads in a room with senior leaders from Transport for London? She never thought she'd see the day.

Jacqui also credits the My Mentor program with her increase in confidence and her recent appointment to a leadership role. This program, she says, challenged her to think differently about her career and, thanks in large part to the support and encouragement of her mentor, Judith Pettitt, she's now in a role that she had never dreamed possible.

I'm more confident than I've ever been, I trust my judgment much more, I'm driven by my career and I know I deserve opportunities that come my way – not in a boastful way, but with a sense of my own capability. I'm also much more confident in my influence as a leader and to lead the way I want to lead.

Her advice for women considering joining VicRoads:

Definitely come and work here. Develop some strong networks and get involved with some of the programs on offer. There may be some hurdles you will need to overcome, but it's all part of the learning and growth experience. There are a lot of people here who will be your fans, and you'll need them!

Is your boss family-friendly? How to read the signs

All of us have commitments outside of work in one role or another – as a partner or parent, as a carer, sister or brother, as a daughter or son. As Jacqui experienced, a supportive manager can help you keep the work-life balance in perspective.

Here are Jacqui's ideas on what a family-friendly manager is like:

- Your manager is your *greatest advocate*, looking out for roles that will grow you as a person and develop your career at the pace and in the direction you want. They promote your capability to others across the organisation.
- Your manager is also your *most honest critic* – recognising your blind spots and alerting you to potential blunders and missteps that can stall or derail your career.
- Your manager *cares about you as a person*. They understand the challenges you face outside of work and create the environment that enables you to flourish as a whole person. This can be as simple as not looking at the clock when you walk in, asking how your sick child is feeling when you return from an unexpected doctor's visit, providing flexible working arrangements in an attitude of trust, or enabling you to take time off unexpectedly, as needed, to attend to immediate crises in the family.

Managers like these make you feel valued, inspired and challenged, says Jacqui. In return you must be prepared to be flexible and demonstrate your dedication to deliver.

As Jacqui's story shows, women can succeed at VicRoads. It can be exhausting and enormously challenging to navigate a career in a conservative, male-dominated culture. But by forging her own path, Jacqui has helped pave the way and provided the signposts for other women to succeed and excel too.



Sarita Narayan

Sarita, acting director network policy and standards, has twenty-one years of experience in project management, strategy development and evaluation. As a change manager, Sarita has had many roles improving organisational systems, processes and services to increase efficiencies. At VicRoads, Sarita leads the investment outcomes team that assists the organisation to make better investment decisions, with a focus on delivering better value outcomes for community and customers. Key aspects of the role include researching, influencing and working with partners to embed a best practice approach to developing, prioritising and evaluating projects and programs across VicRoads, which lead to a more efficient and transparent decision-making process.

The custodian of culture

Sarita Narayan

This is a story about many things. It's a story about Sarita's long struggle to live up to her family's expectations in her own way. It's about learning to embrace a new cultural identity without losing or disrespecting your heritage.

It's a story about making excruciating choices between the moral laws, values and expected behaviour set down by her family and religion, and living an authentic life in Australia. It's a story about Sarita discovering her voice and learning to express herself. It's a story about Sarita's determination to succeed against the odds, in a workplace that played to different rules, but failed to provide her the rulebook. It's a story about her coming back stronger after her world crumbled and fell apart around her.

The daughter of a village

Perhaps the best place to start Sarita's story is right back with her great-great-grandparents. Part of the diaspora of over 60,000 Indian indentured labourers, they were brought to Fiji by its British colonial rulers in the late 1800s to provide labour for Fiji's sugar cane plantations. Not slavery exactly, but at 12c US per month plus rations, it came close.*

Fast-forward to the twentieth century. The third child out of five,

* Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_indenture_system

Sarita grew up in a traditional Indian family in a small Fijian village. Sarita's parents were farmers, with no formal education.

She describes herself as being born not just into a family, but into a village. Indeed, the village's hopes and dreams were placed on the education of one of the children. A university degree would be a path to an esteemed profession such as doctor, lawyer or teacher, which would secure prosperity for the family and elevate the fortunes of the village.

Sarita was the chosen one. Her older brother went to trade school. Her parents decided her older sister would enter into an arranged marriage, as soon as she finished her high school.

Part of the reason for choosing Sarita may have gone way back to an incident when she was just five years old. She had contracted a life-threatening illness and was in a coma, not expected to live. Her parents took up a prayer vigil and she recovered, against all odds. Perhaps they believed God returned her to them, for a higher purpose.

As a result, Sarita grew up in the intersection between family love, pride and duty. As she matured into adulthood she had to develop broad shoulders to carry with her the expectations of not just her family, but the whole village.

She completed a science degree in Fiji to make her parents happy, she says, but she had no interest in taking a path to medicine. So she was thrilled when she was awarded a scholarship for a Bachelor of Science in Forestry at the Australian National University. You can imagine the challenge of persuading her parents that a degree in forestry was a suitable career choice over medicine! She did not want to let her family down or destroy their standing in the community, but she felt strongly that a degree in forestry could lead her to a career with real purpose and meaning.

My parents understood a doctor, lawyer or teacher to be a good thing, but telling them I'm a forester! It was hard for them to understand what a forester was. And it was harder for them to go back to the community and say, 'Hang on! My daughter's not becoming a doctor or even going into the medical field. She's now going to go into forestry!'

Hearing Sarita explain that forestry was about bush management

must have been confusing and alarming to them, and was seen as a waste of the educational opportunity they had fought so hard to provide her. It was only once she returned to Fiji as a qualified forester, working in a senior role in a Fijian government department, that they could finally reconcile her career decision and conclude it was, perhaps, not such a bad a choice after all. Government roles are highly respected in Fiji.

My three lives

For a while I lived three lives – my life as a Fijian Indian, my life as an Australian migrant, and I also met a spiritual master in India and decided I wanted to become a follower.

Her spiritual commitment involved dedicating her life to helping others. She travelled frequently to India to study the scriptures, to be guided by her spiritual master and to support the poor. In the Indian culture, a spiritual life is more significant than material life, so this choice gained her parents' approval and elevated their status in the village.

The way of life prescribed by Hinduism, along with the relationship with her spiritual master, could guide her in difficult times, as she was soon to discover.

‘Initially, Sarita’s desire was to devote herself totally to her spiritual life in India and serving others.’

Initially, Sarita’s desire was to devote herself totally to her spiritual life in India and serving others. Her parents, however, had different ideas. They did not wish her to throw away the opportunities that her education had provided in favour of a life of spiritual contemplation in India. Her two younger siblings were also financially dependent on Sarita for their further education. So she returned to Fiji and dedicated herself to supporting her family.

Initially, her younger sister joined her in Suva (the capital of Fiji) where Sarita worked. After her sister graduated from university, Sarita migrated to Australia. Her younger brother followed and Sarita became responsible for his education and wellbeing as well. Sarita had

to grow up fast, thrown headlong into the responsibility of financially supporting two of her siblings, with almost no money for herself in a foreign western world. ‘I felt that instantly I had become a mother... my younger brother still lives in Sydney and he still respects me like his mother.’

Over the years, she sent money home to her parents and returned regularly to the village. Her siblings are married now, but she still provides support to her parents and the village, even today. At times her success felt like a great burden:

When I migrated, I felt there was a lot of pressure on me, not only to be successful in making a life here, but also to support them [back in Fiji]. There is always this level of guilt because my older brother and sister in Fiji haven't got the same opportunities as I have. I always wanted to be successful because my success was not only my success. It was success for my family and my community back in Fiji.

Sarita also maintained contact with her spiritual master and continued to help women and children in remote villages in India get an education and receive medical support through a charity organisation.

She traces her determination to succeed in life back to these formative early years and the expectations placed on her by her family and the village.

My name is Sarita, which means the river. My dad used to always say that you will continue to flow like the river and there will be nothing in your life that will stop you.

Her migration to Australia changed her perspective, she believes. Over the years, she became much more western in her outlook and struggled to reconcile her Fijian Indian culture and her spiritualism with her emerging western values. She began seeing the world through a different lens.

This struggle came to a head when her choice of getting married and settling down did not get the expected approval from her parents and her religious community. She was torn between the fabric of religious expectations and personal wishes.

The language barrier

There is more to communicating than speaking high school English,

Sarita discovered. Sure, she studied English at school, but the way we speak locally is vastly different to the textbook version she was taught in Fiji, so Sarita often struggled to understand others and make herself understood at work.

Aussie slang can be the worst nightmare of someone from a non-English speaking background. Sarita understands this very well. Once, early in her career, Sarita attended a meeting where her manager asked her, 'What's the ballpark figure?' 'The what?' she thought. She'd never heard the term ballpark and didn't feel brave enough to ask.

Morning teas could also be fraught with misunderstandings and awkward moments. Her colleagues would discuss the weekend's footy results and Sarita had no idea what they were talking about. During the cricket season, they would try to include Sarita in conversations about cricket, assuming she was Indian so she must be an avid fan. However, no one played cricket in Fiji, so again she was left feeling inadequate and excluded, without the ability to contribute to the conversation in a meaningful way.

Forestry, as you can imagine, is a blokey environment, which further compounded Sarita's sense of exclusion. At work parties she tended to sit back rather than join in, fearful she would not be accepted.

At times, she felt overwhelmed with the challenge of fitting in. It just seemed easier to opt out of social interactions and concentrate on doing her job well, but this only further confirmed her outsider status.

Her inability to communicate with ease significantly impacted on her self-confidence. As Sarita explained: 'If I can't speak the same way as everyone else, I'll probably feel like I'll be laughed at, so I'm not going to speak up.'

She received feedback from her manager that others saw her as a poor performer because of her inability to communicate in meetings.

Enough was enough. Sarita decided to take matters into her own hands. She signed up for training programs in speaking with confidence, and effective writing skills and presentation skills, some at her own expense. She also observed other good communicators in meetings and learned to emulate their style.

Friends in high places

Fortunately, Sarita worked for a number of managers whom she felt comfortable approaching in critical times to help navigate the minefield of the Aussie culture, and who supported her at turning points in her career. They provided her with sound advice or tools and suggestions that helped her work through seemingly intractable problems. ‘One of the good things that I learned about myself was that if I got stuck, I’d always ask someone for help, like when I needed to make career choices.’

These managers would see through her communication challenges and judge her only on her deliverables. They built her confidence and motivated her to succeed – if *they* were confident she could perform, then she was determined not to let them down.

She also leaned on a long and deep relationship with her spiritual master when times were tough: ‘Every time I was stuck I could ring him up and talk to him. My confidence was built on that relationship.’

Not all managers were supportive, however. Sarita recalls once working for a manager who was a bully. He would openly criticise her in meetings, undermine her authority with staff and even claimed some of her work as his own. Was this behaviour motivated by racism? Sarita didn’t label it as such. She witnessed him bullying and intimidating others too. Hoping to resolve the problem, she reported his behaviour to human resources who advised her she could make a formal complaint. Initiating a formal complaint process was not a solution, Sarita believed, as the relationship would only deteriorate further from such a direct confrontation. She felt a better option would be to leave the team, so she took the opportunity to move to another division when approached by a director who acknowledged her skills and asked her to come on board.

Taking a step back

Her MBA studies provided Sarita with an unexpected advantage. She completed a research project on the role of place management in activity centres across councils, which was published on the Department of Planning and Community Development’s website and converted into an information booklet. These documents are still in use today.

Sarita had become a known and sought-after individual in the department – not exactly fame, but certainly recognition for her expertise.

Her MBA studies further developed her confidence, improved her communication skills and helped create a network of friends. She built on this growing reputation when she moved to VicRoads, accepting a role implementing the Victorian Auditor-General’s recommendations to improve VicRoads’ ability to measure and evaluate community outcomes through its investment decisions. This was a high profile project that had a significant impact across VicRoads.

Her approach was simple. She wasn’t an engineer or a roads specialist. So she used a process of enquiry, bringing together the expertise and knowledge of specialists to pool ideas and collaboratively create solutions. The most interesting aspect of this approach was the way she transformed her communication weakness into strength:

The language barrier actually became a useful tool in VicRoads. I didn’t understand a lot of engineering jargon and I would ask the right questions so I could simplify the concepts in writing in a way that our stakeholders could understand. So what was a handicap became a positive for me.

The roadshows and information sessions that accompanied this project provided Sarita with a significant profile across VicRoads: ‘Maybe because I was different, with darker skin, with an outgoing personality, wearing my red dress and all that stuff, I don’t think I got forgotten!’

The frameworks underpinning the investment management approach that she developed were adopted and modelled by a number of transport agencies and government departments across Australia and New Zealand.

In 2012, she was awarded VicRoads’ Outstanding Performer Award. Her parents and the whole village were enormously proud.

Success breeds success and a bit of self-confidence also goes a long way. At the conclusion of this project, Sarita secured a six-month secondment as the director of network strategy and planning, largely due to her exceptional change management capability. This was the high-water mark of Sarita’s career.

However, during the months of application and appointment to

this position, her life started to unravel in ways that would rock her world and test her faith.

First, her spiritual master suddenly passed away after a fall. People were sympathetic to her at work, but didn't understand the relationship or know how to support her:

People don't understand the relationship between a guru and a student in this culture. That relationship is more than you would have with your parents or even your partner. It's a very subtle relationship, based on a journey from the beginning to the end and your commitment is until death. If someone's father dies or mother dies people give you flowers or cards. When my spiritual master died, I felt alone and lost, having to rush to get my visa, run away to India for a couple of weeks, and then come back and start working again as normal.

She attended the funeral in India, a ritual that is brutal by western standards. Along with thousands of other grieving mourners she watched a pyre being constructed, her beloved teacher being placed on the pyre and his body being burned.

It was not until she returned to Australia that she was struck by the reality of her loss. She was devastated that she could no longer call on her teacher's wisdom to help her through difficult times. Each day she relived the funeral in her mind.

Then her relationship with her fiancé broke down. Sarita had bought a family house in a new, less familiar suburb and had to sell her existing unit. She struggled with the overwhelming pressure, pain and isolation this brought. If her guru had been alive, he could have helped her move through this grief and change. Without him she felt totally alone.

She was working with a new executive director with whom she did not have an established relationship and was leading some team members who were struggling with their own personal issues. She understood the pain they were going through and says the mother in her wanted to make it better. Yet she was dealing with her own stress and pain, and lacked the armour she says leaders need in order to be able to support staff without taking their problems home with them.

Sarita is strong and resilient. Yet these blows, coming one after another, finally broke her will and her health. She was having dizzy

spells and anxiety attacks. She was distressed to be told by her doctors she may have a brain tumour and underwent numerous medical tests and examinations. Fortunately, they all came back clear. Sarita recalls that her superiors were hugely supportive, but didn't understand her needs:

There were well-meaning people trying to prop me up and support me at the time saying, 'You've done fantastic work in VicRoads. This might not have worked for you but we can support you,' and offering me all this leadership training. All I could think was, 'But I haven't got the energy.'

Six months into the new role she realised she wasn't delivering outcomes to the standards she expected of herself and felt overwhelmed by a great sense of failure.

Finding the path back

Sarita recognised she needed time to grieve and time for her body, mind and spirit to recover. Her strategy was to return to a familiar place where she felt capable, confident and back in control. That place was back in her former role.

Part of her recovery involved reconciling within herself the guilt and sense of failure she felt because senior people, including the chief executive, had placed their trust in her. So she took matters into her own hands, again. She emailed the chief executive to apologise for letting him down. He assured her that her track record of success hadn't been wiped clean with one bad phase and he still wholeheartedly believed in her as a valued leader.

That gave me a lot of confidence and I've learned from that conversation to have the same discussion with my staff. If something doesn't go right, it's important to remind staff of things that they've done well. I feel that is very powerful.

The pain and humiliation of failure must have been a bitter pill to swallow for someone like Sarita, who has always relied on her tenacity and perseverance to overcome obstacles and succeed. Yet failure is life's greatest teacher and learning to bounce back is essential for success. Sarita's unexpected setback taught her she is not invincible, that she has flaws and she can fail. It gave her the resilience to be able

to reflect on her failures and the insight to recognise she had given her best.

I've learned in my career there are ups and downs. What I've learned is when you are down, you need to be able to find support to get up and it's not always going to be rosy. I've also learned that I like to be liked and I like to keep everyone happy, but that's not always possible.

The step backwards was not catastrophic. Her decision to sit on the sidelines for a while enabled her to rejoin the fray with greater energy and determination than ever. Since then, she has taken other secondments as a director and is a better and stronger leader for the experience.

In any culture, the ability to transcend adversity is an essential step to becoming a great leader.

Sarita's story demonstrates that having the courage to confront a situation and make a graceful retreat are not strategies that kill careers, but can make them stronger. She also demonstrated to the executive team at VicRoads that she has the humility, courage and determination to overcome setbacks and be a future leader: 'Life's a learning game and I'm always learning.'

Bridging the gap between cultures

This is not just a story of Sarita's career journey, her successes, her setbacks and her strategies for recovery. It is also about how she is part of something bigger than herself.

Sarita is passionate about generating an understanding in the office of different cultural backgrounds and breaking down barriers across cultures. Cultural differences matter. In many western workplaces an employer expects you to look her in the eye and give her a firm handshake; in many eastern cultures this behaviour may be seen as inappropriate. In some cultures staff would consider contradicting or questioning their leader as disrespectful, in others it's expected and remaining silent is viewed as a lack of interest or engagement. In some cultures expressing disagreement with another's ideas publicly is seen as disrespectful; in others challenging opinions is considered a sign of leadership excellence.

Sarita is committed to bridging these cultural divides, especially

with women not brought up in Australia. She has walked a mile in the shoes of women who come from a different cultural heritage and have no voice within the Australian culture:

Over last few years, I also rescued two female staff from other areas. They both were passionate about what they were doing but because of their poor language skills the managers felt they may not be performing well. I could see that was me fifteen years ago.

More broadly, five years ago at VicRoads, she commenced a celebration of Diwali, the Hindu festival of light, marking the triumph of good over evil. Each year, she, together with a number of supporters from across VicRoads, decorates the office with colourful lights, plays Bollywood music and brings Indian food. This is Sarita's way of embracing her cultural identity and sharing it with the office. From the first year, the staff took to the celebration with delight.

Motivational speaker Stephen Covey said: 'The essence of being human is being able to direct your own life.'^{*} The next step in Sarita's journey is one that I suspect will be of her choosing, made thoughtfully, with determination and a great deal of wisdom gained from experience.

* Covey, *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness* (Free Press, 2014).



Anita Curnow

Anita Curnow is the executive director access and operations at VicRoads, and is also part of VicRoads' executive leadership team. Throughout her career, Anita has always been driven by a passion for helping people to make good travel decisions and facilitating the transport system needed to support these good decisions. She is passionate about creating a work environment in which people can prosper and bring their best to work. Anita has an honours degree in civil engineering from Monash University and followed this up with a Master of Transport and Traffic, also from Monash University.

Mentoring matters

Anita Curnow

The under-representation of women in boardrooms and executive offices is well documented. In many industries, women continue to experience career development and progression at a disadvantage to men, facing discrimination unique to women. A growing body of research indicates that the lack of coaching and preparation for women who seek these positions is a major factor in that under-representation, and inadequate career development is the primary reason women have not reached the top rungs of the corporate ladder.* When structured correctly, mentoring programs can, and do, play a central role in fostering talent and preparing both male and female employees for leadership positions. Through sharing her own experiences, executive director access and operations, Anita Curnow, demonstrates how mentoring can be the key to a successful career at VicRoads.

Life's lessons

For those women yet to start a family, it can be easy to underestimate the world of challenges and struggles mothers face at work, juggling career and family responsibilities, until confronted with it. Anita Curnow recalls the penny dropped on two specific occasions.

The first moment came during her employment at Melbourne

* Dworkin, Maurer, Schipani, *Career Mentoring for Women: New Horizons / Expanded Methods* (Kelly University, 2012).

Water. She recalls being shocked at the difficulties faced by her first female boss, who had a young child and worked full-time. How did she do it all? Anita recalls watching very closely and realising it was no mean feat to combine a family and a full-time career.

The second lesson was a tougher one about priorities. Her manager at the Department of Infrastructure, Gail Moody, was at an important meeting in the minster's office one day when the childcare centre rang to advise Gail that her child was sick. Anita took the call, but didn't want to disturb the important meeting so delayed passing on the message. Gail was upset that she did not contact her immediately and Anita felt chastened. It caused her to wonder what she would do in this situation once she had children – would she drop everything? It was a no-brainer once she had children of her own. Yet both these experiences reinforce the importance of walking a mile in the shoes of others before you can truly understand their experiences.

Treading water

Anita began her family while working at the Department of Infrastructure. She elected to work three days per week between having her first and second child, and this was when she experienced the part-time career trap. She was ready for a promotion but felt her career stalling, as there simply were no part-time jobs available at the next level. The clear presumption at the workplace back then was that you couldn't be promoted in a part-time capacity.

She then read a job advertisement for manager, road-based public transport at VicRoads, a role that had her name all over it. She was known at VicRoads through her role at the department and earlier at the RACV. She could meet every selection criterion hands-down. The only complications were that it involved managing people and it was a significant step up – a big promotion even within one's current employer, a seemingly huge step when moving to a new employer.

I went through the selection criteria and I met every single one and I thought, 'I have to apply. Even though I can't possibly get this role. I have to apply because it's absolutely me.' So I did.

She started at VicRoads in 2003 on a part-time basis, just after completing her second period of maternity leave, then transitioned

to full-time after six months.

When I joined VicRoads as an executive I had not had direct reports before. So I was actually very raw in the people management side of things. In a lot of ways, they took a big risk by me giving me that role. I really pinched myself when I was successful in getting it.

The mentoring effect

From day one, Anita quickly came to realise that VicRoads could be somewhat of a battleground, one that she perhaps wasn't fully prepared for. Knowing VicRoads from an external perspective was one thing; being on the inside was somewhat different. She was suddenly thrown into a hierarchical culture that was only apparent from the inside:

There was this fearsome culture that strong criticism would be expected when bringing things forward. I had a couple of opportunities to present to the corporate management group and, because of what I had heard, I was really fearful that I would say something wrong or look silly. There were some parts of VicRoads where it was very hard to get traction [as a woman] – to progress what you wanted to do, or to feel as though your contribution was something they valued. I tended to just work where I felt I could make a difference. I didn't really understand the reason for the resistance and I felt I was ill-equipped to tackle it.

I took me some time to understand that it's all very well to put together new guidelines and get funding for programs, but unless you actually have the relationships with people in the regions and you're able to get them on board with what you're trying to do, then nothing's going to change.

Anita attributes much of her success during these early days to her manager, Ted Vincent. Although she didn't use the word mentor, it sounds like he was her biggest champion and confidence-builder in those critical first months when anyone can easily listen to the wrong people, apply poor judgment or make fatal missteps. Ted taught her about decision-making processes in VicRoads, helped her adapt to the new culture and leadership style, and helped her engage her team and her internal stakeholders.

I had a fantastic general manager that I reported to at the time, Ted Vincent. As a new employee he taught me how to navigate the world of working at VicRoads. Ted was extremely encouraging and supportive of me.

An inspiring role model

In an organisation with an under-representation of female leadership, having examples of women who have succeeded can be very important for women. After all, how can you be what you can't see? Anita recalls one woman who had a very powerful and inspirational effect on her:

There was a woman who I worked with who was also part of the leadership team reporting to Ted Vincent, an engineer called Janet Brash. I thought Janet was fantastic. She was a bit older than me, a bit more experienced and had been an executive for a bit longer. I really loved working with her and she was a bit of a trailblazer. Sadly, Janet died of breast cancer, but I still like to think of her from time to time and reflect on her journey and the courage she showed during that time. I aspired to be like her. I just loved the way that she was respected for her technical knowledge and how she collaborated, both within and external to VicRoads.

Accelerating change

The number of female leaders had dwindled at VicRoads by 2013, ten years after Anita joined. Many executive women had left and, of those who stayed, few were engineers or in positions of leadership: 'I knew there were female engineers out there but I didn't see them in vRO6 roles.'

Anita recalls that of the seventy or so executives there were just six women and, of these, only two were engineers.* She wanted to understand what was stopping women progressing at VicRoads and the issues women were experiencing that may affect their retention or overall quality of life.

Anita led the development of a survey of technical women to

* Women in Technical Roles in VicRoads, October 2013.

identify career stalling and stoppers. One clear message from the survey results was that, while many women felt part-time and flexible arrangements were readily available, when they took these arrangements their careers stalled, they were overlooked for promotions and were automatically excluded from consideration for management roles. The survey also uncovered a strong demand for formal and informal mentoring arrangements, and a need to provide broader networking opportunities amongst technical women.

The survey uncovered many challenges women faced including finding their voice and being heard, getting their career back on track after a break or after taking a part-time role, improving their confidence levels, especially in applying for promotions and receiving support to tackle challenges of being a female in a male-dominated workplace. Most of these challenges could be addressed through the implementation of a mentoring program, Anita believed.

The art and science of mentoring

As these findings emerged, John Merritt was appointed CEO at VicRoads. Enlightened by his view on what was possible, VicRoads implemented a range of measures including the introduction of My Mentor, a formal mentoring program. A total of eighty women have participated in the program to date, which completed its third cycle in late 2016. The mentoring program aims to inspire, energise and motivate women to create success in their lives. Thanks in large part to the program, barriers to career success are being eliminated, there is a diverse and inclusive culture, and a mentoring leadership style is now a natural way of leading others at VicRoads.

Mentoring is both a science and an art. The science is to implement a structured, formal mentoring program like My Mentor; the art is to develop informal mentoring as a critical leadership skill that all leaders can apply everyday.

Anita is one of the mentors in the formal My Mentor program and has mentored three women over three rounds of a twelve-week program. She challenges her mentees to develop self-awareness of their skills, values and passions, and then think big, to look beyond the obvious and to strive for an inspiring, courageous future. She has

learned that it is more effective to provide guidance by asking the right questions, than to share how she handled a situation. This approach enables her mentees to hone their critical-thinking skills, to learn to listen to their instincts, and to use their judgment to back decisions that are right for them, rather than applying strategies that worked for someone else.

Anita is learning to apply the art of mentoring in her daily relationships with her direct reports as well, asking them questions to help them work through a problem themselves, rather than giving them a solution:

I had an example of this just a couple of days ago. In the end we were both happier, she'd worked out how she was going to deal with the issue and I was really pleased that I hadn't jumped to the solution. In fact, the solution she'd come up with was better than what I would have done.

As someone who many women tend to turn to as a confidential, trusted advisor, Anita's door is always open and she is providing plenty of informal mentoring. Some instances could be termed 'just-at-the-right-time mentoring' on specific issues confronting someone that day. Recently, for example, she worked with a woman on interview skills. The experience led to a discussion about referees and who to select. This woman is highly regarded by senior leaders at VicRoads, yet she had not nominated any senior leaders as referees.

*'Why haven't you got so-and-so on your list?' I asked.
And she said, 'Oh, well, he wouldn't want to be my referee.'
I said, 'Well, he would talk about you in positive terms, so I don't see why not.' She said, 'Really?'
And I said, 'Yeah, really. Go and ask him.'*

Others have consulted with her about how to manage work-life balance. Some women have gone to her, before anyone else in VicRoads, to tell her they are pregnant and they wanted advice on what to do, how to tell people and how to position themselves during that stage of their life and career. She feels very honoured when women share these confidences with her.

Anita also attests to the power of informal mentoring in her own career at VicRoads:

When I first joined the executive leadership team (ELT), I got tired of John [the CEO] asking me what I thought. Every few minutes he'd turn around and say, 'What do you think about this, Anita?' I often hesitated, thinking, 'I don't know.' But actually now, reflecting back, I know what he was doing. He was building my confidence by implying, 'We value what you have to say. We want you to make a contribution.' Then, a couple of times, I had something to add that was a different perspective and he would point out to others just how important it was that I had made that contribution. That made me feel really good.

Not that she's always had unconditional support. VicRoads very nearly lost Anita during a transition point in her career, when she was unable to see a future there. She started to think about her next career step and was drawing a blank. She had just missed out on a promotion to a more significant director role. The management group was impenetrable, she believed, and it seemed you had to join a very long queue to get there. Many senior leadership roles were filled by long-serving managers who had no intention of leaving for another decade or so. She began applying for roles in local government and was on a shortlist of two.

I thought, 'Oh, now what am I going to do?' I went and had a chat with one of the senior leaders of the organisation. I said, 'I'm down to the last two with a job in local government. I never actually expected to be in this position where I am considering leaving VicRoads at this stage in my career. Is there anything that I should know if I'm going to accept a role outside of VicRoads?' The response was really hard to hear. It was, 'I can't promise you anything.' Sure, special treatment is not what is required, but I knew that there weren't many female engineers around in the organisation who could step up at that stage. I was looking around thinking, 'The women are dropping like flies around here.' All the executive women were leaving and I found that really disappointing.

Fortunately for VicRoads, she missed out on the local government role and the rest is history. However, it was one of those sliding-door moments when her career could have gone in any direction.

Advocacy is the turbocharger

Mentoring, whether formal or informal, doesn't happen in a vacuum, and often morphs into a form of direct advocacy and sponsorship. When that happens, the effect on careers is turbocharged, as Anita discovered:

John invited me to act in the executive director corporate services role. I was incredulous because it was a sideways move from one field to another, as well as an upward move. I thought you could only do one dimension at a time. I said, 'What? You want me to go across and up? I can't do that together.' Even though I hadn't discounted the possibility of a more senior leadership role, I always imagined it would be in the technical area, not in a different part of the business.

I said, 'Really? You really think I can do that?' and he replied, 'Absolutely go for it. Make it your own. Do what you think is the right thing once you get there. Don't try and follow any rules that anyone else has set before you. It's your thing. Do it.' It was really empowering and it taught me a lot about myself and what I could do.

She really enjoyed the six months spent in that role and she gained the experience and self-confidence that enabled her to succeed in applying for her next role, totally on merit.

I'll have what he's having

Change is happening – and it's accelerating – but there is more work to be done.

When I came here, I had three male directors reporting to me and now I have two female directors and one rotating chairperson. At the moment, there's a female in that as well. So it's a completely different place to what it was before, but we've still got a way to go with the level below that.

Anita describes a lingering sense of cynicism in some managers, who feel that women receive favourable treatment over men and bypass the merit principle. The way she responds is to remind people there is a difference between forgoing the merit principle in appointments (which VicRoads is *not* doing) and stimulating a more diverse, stronger field of applicants (which VicRoads *is* doing). There is a difference between an extrovert and a leader, and it's harder, but ultimately more

rewarding, to look below the surface for leadership talent.

There is another barrier that has no straightforward solution – it's the organisational gridlock around many middle and senior roles held by long-serving employees. Staff in some teams see little opportunity to progress:

I think there is a real opportunity to mix things up a bit – give people a chance to try a different role, see themselves make a fresh contribution elsewhere in the business. Ultimately, this has the potential to create space for fresh perspectives and leadership styles to spring up where, previously, roles looked like being occupied by the long-serving incumbent for years to come.

One solution may be to extend VicRoads' flexible working policy to these employees, encouraging them to convert to part-time as a gentle way to transition to retirement.

Breaking new ground

Anita's story shows that relationships at work can make or break careers for women. A trusted and confidential relationship with a mentor who can guide and sponsor talented women can help identify opportunities and provide a voice to women who may not otherwise be heard. Women who are well connected, whose voices are heard, and are backed by mentors are more likely to be considered for that plum assignment, the next promotion or an interesting sideways move, than women who hope their achievements alone will speak for themselves.

Anita says that we will know VicRoads has truly succeeded in creating sustainable change when its diversity initiatives stand alone, when they are accessed by all employees, not just women, and they outlive John Merritt's tenure as CEO, the driving force behind the change:

Whether John ends up being here for four years or ten, at the end of that we have to get ourselves to a position where it will go on regardless. An inclusive way of working together has to be the fabric of the organisation. It will be demonstrated through the number of women in leadership roles, and by then the cultural diversity represented as well, so that we are truly reflecting the community we serve and we become an employer that people absolutely aspire to work for.



Matilda Tonkin

Matilda, projects engineer, joined the VicRoads graduate program after graduating from the University of Melbourne with a degree in civil engineering. She works as a site engineer on the Level Crossing Removal Project. She loves working in construction and hopes that she can be part of more exciting projects like this in the future. She wants to share her experiences at VicRoads in this book to show how the culture and behaviour of the people around us can affect our experiences when going into a new workplace. Her hobbies include playing hockey and netball, and she is currently the secretary of the Melbourne University Hockey Club.

Breaking new ground – a graduate’s story

Matilda Tonkin

VicRoads’ commitment to gender diversity is at an all-time high. Yet, like many organisations, it has a long way to go in the representation and retention of women. There are women aplenty in the domains of human resources, communications, planning and administration, but women remain under-represented in operational and engineering domains. Women are still in the minority when it comes to entry-level graduate positions too, so fewer end up on the path to leadership.

This makes the experiences of young female graduates like Matilda Tonkin all the more compelling.

Discovering engineering

Watching Matilda move with ease around the construction office at Metro Projects Central, one could assume that she was naturally destined to pursue an engineering career. However, becoming an engineer was not on Matilda’s radar when she was growing up. Instead, she enrolled in medicine at university but she was unclear about what she wanted to do next, so she decided to take a gap year and join the navy. From the very first day, when she was awarded the Recruit of the Intake, she loved her year in defence. She was paid a good salary, worked with young people, made many friends and had a stimulating life. A career in defence sounded like an exciting future for her so she investigated ways in which she could make it happen. The Australian Defence Force Academy was offering degrees in engi-

neering and this appealed to her – her father was an engineer and she loved the hands-on nature of engineering work.

The navy gave her a passion for engineering, but ironically she decided against pursuing this career in defence. Working in the navy was great fun while she was young, yet she quickly recognised it was also a fairly transient lifestyle and did not offer the career challenges she was seeking.

So Matilda enrolled in engineering at the University of Melbourne, commencing in mechanical engineering then switching to civil engineering as her interest in construction grew. Around 40 per cent of her graduate class was female. She soon discovered that the representation of female engineers in the workforce would be much lower.

VicRoads seemed a logical career choice for Matilda because of its focus on major infrastructure. She started at VicRoads in the graduate program in 2014, as the only female out of five graduates starting that year.

The VicRoads graduate program offers three rotations of six months each and provides an internal mentor to guide and support them throughout the program. Matilda’s mentor was very helpful at critical points during her graduate experience, guiding her through VicRoads policies and practices, and helping her think through her options for graduate rotations and her final placement.

Matilda’s rotations were interesting, varied and enabled her to build a broader skill base in contract administration. She initially expected to be involved in more technical work, but contractors completed much of this work. She found that applying engineering formulae and calculations became less important than applying her technical knowledge to manage specific projects and scenarios.

Rotation #1 – The enlightened team

She struck gold in her first rotation at the M80 project office at Essendon Fields. Here she was working on the intelligence transport systems, which control the freeway data and communications systems. She loved the work and the people.

For a short period, she had a female team leader. It was her first and only time working in a team led by a VicRoads female leader (her

current manager is a woman but she is employed by Metro Trains Melbourne). Her leader’s priority was to create a positive culture and retain valuable staff during different stages of their lives, and this was demonstrated by real action, not mere words.

It was different. It was diverse. There were a number of female team leaders, many who worked flexible hours, who had come back from maternity leave or were just going on maternity leave. One woman got a promotion while she was pregnant, even though it was clear she was about to start her maternity leave. There was a feeling you could do pretty much anything. It was a great example of flexibility at VicRoads.

At team meetings there would be candid and open dialogue about the culture and any issues raised would be promptly addressed.

The people were really lovely. It was an excellent culture. Instead of just talking about it, they spent a lot of time working on the culture and making sure that everybody has a safe and comfortable place to work.

It was a good start to her career at VicRoads and it confirmed her desire to work in construction and delivery, rather than planning or policy.

She commenced the My Mentor program in this rotation. Her mentor encouraged her to voice her opinions, was a sounding board for issues and provided good career advice. She began to think about her career direction over the next five years.

Rotation #2 – The traditional way

Her second rotation took her to the Traralgon office in the Latrobe Valley, where she performed periodic maintenance work. She enjoyed the rural experience and had fun sharing a house with another young VicRoads engineer.

She was welcomed in the regional office and had many opportunities to learn and grow. Her manager supported her My Mentor involvement and proudly attended her graduation from the program. The region operated on a smaller budget with fewer resources, so she was given more responsibility, she managed contracts fairly autonomously with help close by if she needed it. She loved working on-site and the team ensured she was given as many opportunities as possible

to go on site visits.

Whenever someone would be on-site, they would say: ‘Matilda really likes going, can you take her?’ Or, ‘Matilda really likes to go check out different parts of the countryside. Can you take her for experience on network inspections?’

She recalls going to see how roads were resealed for the first time:

They have a truck that sprays out a kind of bitumen mixture and then they just pour rock over the top layer. Going and actually seeing that happen was pretty cool. And I remember being out for a drive around Gippsland, doing inspections with the team; all the scenery, it was amazing.

There’s a road in the middle of nowhere, near the border with New South Wales, that VicRoads is responsible for that is in bad shape. It’s a very narrow dirt road on a cliff and driving down it and comparing it to the roads that we have in the city was amazing.

Rotation #3 – Head office

For her third rotation, Matilda elected to move to Road Standards and Traffic, located in head office at Kew. It was a technical role, which Matilda relished, working on introducing safety barriers, signs and line-marking designs. It included traffic modelling which was pretty exciting.

When I was in Road Standards and Traffic, we did some crash testing of some ‘ice on the road’ warning signs. I got to go and witness that, so that was great. I saw cars drive into these poles at very high speeds and what happened next.

She arrived in Kew just as VicRoads introduced its diversity policy. Her team embraced this policy with enthusiasm. The culture was very positive and diverse, she recalls. It was great to see lots of women in the office in a range of roles, including senior management.

Through the My Mentor program, Matilda began to understand the business case for diversity. ‘I believe diverse organisations have better outcomes, they support and strengthen the need to have more women in leadership positions.’ She strongly believes that women face an uneven playing field and, to redress this imbalance, it is necessary to introduce affirmative action strategies to ensure they receive equal

access to growth, development and promotional opportunities.

However, the case for gender diversity is not reaching all employees. Those that don’t prioritise gender diversity are likely to point to a perceived favouritism and fear they are being disadvantaged due to ‘unfair’ diversity programs.

Whenever you change the status quo, some people will think they are worse off, but by giving everyone an equal chance and addressing the current imbalance, everyone benefits from diversity in the workplace.

They seem to be missing the point that if the workplace was already inclusive and fair now, the number of women and men across VicRoads would more closely mirror gender equality.

Finding her place

At the end of her graduate rotation program, Matilda applied for a permanent role within Metro Projects Central. At first she was unsuccessful and was, naturally, disappointed. However a role became available within three months of her interview process. She contacted the regional director to let him know she was still really keen to work in Metro Projects Central. He called back fifteen minutes later to congratulate her – as she was the next best candidate from the previous interview process, he was pleased to offer her the position.

She was stoked. What she loves about being an engineer is the technical, practical nature of the work and that her work makes a difference in people’s lives – that couldn’t

‘What she loves about being an engineer is the technical, practical nature of the work and that her work makes a difference in people’s lives – that couldn’t be truer than in this role, working on the Level Crossing Removal Project.’

be truer than in this role, working on the Level Crossing Removal Project. Her team has completed the Burke Road level crossing removal and is currently working on the North Road level crossing removal on the Frankston line.

One of her most memorable moments was walking on Burke Road, in the tunnel before the railway was opened: ‘Knowing that people

would not be able to walk where I was walking in the future because there would always be trains going through there, that was pretty cool.'

These projects are managed as an alliance between VicRoads, Metro Trains Melbourne, KBR, John Holland and Public Transport Victoria (PTV). Matilda discovered that working with a contractor is very different to a government organisation. On the positive side, it's very fast paced and she has more decision-making power. She enjoys the role very much and it has confirmed her commitment to continuing a career in construction. However, the downside is that she works incredibly long hours, mainly due to the decision to condense the Frankston Line Acceleration Program to a thirty-seven-day occupation. It is exhausting and she is looking forward to returning to head office at some stage, back to normal working hours again.

The nature of the work in a construction team, and especially the extensive long hours, can be a real barrier for women who require flexible hours. Workplaces like VicRoads and Metro Trains Melbourne offer much more flexibility for women and may be a better career choice for women at different stages in their careers if contractors do not rise to the challenge and offer a more family-friendly workplace, she believes.

Matilda sampled a whole range of project work and subcultures across regions and head office during her graduate rotations. Throughout this time, she has not experienced any discrimination due to her gender. In fact, being a woman at VicRoads just now has had its advantages.

'I got opportunities the guys didn't get,' she says, 'like participating in the My Mentor program.'

From pioneering, to the new normal

While Matilda's experiences have been positive, my reflections after hearing her story are that working in a diverse and inclusive environment, where everyone can contribute and be successful, depends on the individual team culture and the values and behaviours of its leaders.

Gender mix is not a guarantee of diversity or inclusion – some female leaders can be just as masculine in their leadership style

as men. However, it is a first step to challenging the status quo and demolishing outdated beliefs around stereotypical roles for men and women.

Cultural change is critical for a work environment to become inclusive and meritocratic, and the CEO has to be relentless in pursuing this goal. At VicRoads, there is action behind the words and many women and men are rightly proud of VicRoads’ progress towards equality in recent times.



Dale Andrea

As the chief information officer at VicRoads, Dale helps create transport solutions with customers that deliver better journeys and productivity to the state. Dale is also a director on the board of Intelligent Transport Systems (ITS) Australia, connecting industry professionals across the globe to the technological disruption occurring in transport. Dale's job is to provide strategic direction and assurance for corporate ICT; his passion is creating inclusive and inspirational workplaces that empower people and stimulate exceptional talent. Dale's career has spanned academia, R&D, policy development, corporate strategy and international consulting. Dale uses his experience to guide around 150 ICT professionals to design business-focused digital transformation.

IO

Diversity is everyone's business

Dale Andrea

This is the story of one male manager who understands that the critical role men play in eliminating gender inequalities at work. Dale's awareness of gender bias emerged through his experiences working with women and observing their struggles, plus having his own personal moment of truth. He is now an active champion for gender equality, committed to creating an environment where everyone, irrespective of gender, has the opportunity to grow and flourish.

Dale's journey of discovery

With a background in psychology and a PhD that explored the human factors that lead to road crashes, Dale Andrea joined VicRoads in order to apply this expertise in a policy role. He was excited about the opportunity until he came across a VicRoads staff member whom he knew from his time doing road safety research:

She said to me: 'Dale, why would you come here? You can't possibly see this as a step up.' Immediately, I wanted to pack up my things and go back to where I came from. That gave me a sense that we didn't have a lot of confidence in ourselves as an organisation.

Yet he stayed and says VicRoads has been an amazing career choice. Although it can be constrained by a strict regulatory environment and the bureaucracy that comes with it, VicRoads has been an organisation that enables people to have a go and try something new. Dale has been on numerous overseas projects that have given him incredible

international exposure and a global perspective that he applies back in Australia. He now wants to provide these types of opportunities to others, irrespective of their gender or background.

Dale's support of diversity and inclusion initiatives is rooted in his core beliefs and personal values around justice and giving everyone a fair go.

I see diversity not as a thing where I'm trying to advocate for women, I just see it as a smart business practice. It's something we should be doing to create an equal, fair, inviting, engaging workplace for everyone.

Yet, he says, having worked mainly for female managers, he was at first unaware of the inequities and exclusion experienced by women, and took gender equality as a given. He thought that surely women were progressing now they were visible in some leadership roles. Then he started to look around and realised that few women chose ICT as a career. 'What is it really like for them?' he wondered.

Often men are part of the majority group and may be blind to the discrimination and exclusion experienced by those in the minority. Dale started looking more closely at the subtle indicators and behaviours in the workplace that were holding some people back. He observed that some highly competent people – women, but also people from different cultural backgrounds – whose input to discussions would make a positive difference to outcomes and decisions, felt vulnerable or out of place, reluctant to speak up and avoided contributing to discussions. They appeared to lack confidence and had difficulty finding their voice in the louder crowd. This compelled him to think differently about how to engage the whole workforce.

While he credits a number of events to changing his thinking over the last few years, a recent personal experience of exclusion cemented his resolve to speak up. Wanting to be the best dad he could be to his new daughter, he joined his partner Kristie on visits to the maternal healthcare centre for the first few months. He noticed that all the conversations were directed to the mother. He asked Kristie if she had noticed – she hadn't. At the next meeting, the nurse asked whether Kristie had any history of genetic disorders, but not Dale, even though he was right there in the room. It was patently clear

to Kristie at that point. Dale commented that he felt totally devalued, invisible and unimportant as a carer. This was a powerful lesson to draw on: 'I haven't experienced those feelings at work, but that's exactly what women must experience at certain points in their careers in a male-dominated workplace.'

It also reminded Dale that everyone sees the world through their own filter and the stereotypes that shape that perspective. Like the nurse who had little awareness of how she devalued him as a father, people can be devalued at work by disregard or neglect. The effect of this exclusion can be devastating on confidence and motivation. Progressive leaders need to be aware of these potential circumstances, and understand their personal contribution to turn these situations around, he believes.

Dale's thinking was also shaped by the female mentors and role models in his career. He was enormously influenced by his former director and chief information officer (CIO), Susan Sly. Dale describes Susan as a unique person; she was one of the few female chief information officers when she was at VicRoads, and she has an exceptional focus on helping people develop. She challenged him and others to look beyond the technical competence of people, inspired them to think broadly and see things differently, and created a caring and supporting environment for people to make good career choices.

Susan encouraged her managers to attend 'women in ICT' events. Dale knew the number of women in ICT was very low across the industry, and as a leader it was critical to understand why. He said he attended the first couple of events with some trepidation; at times he was one of only a few men in the room. But he noted that the events were always stimulating. They had inspirational speakers with high credentials, and women's stories were shared – their successes, as well as the challenges and subtle forms of discrimination they faced.

By participating in these events and understanding the struggles women in ICT face, Dale came to believe that, up until now, the ICT industry has failed women. In some areas, women were not respected as much as their male counterparts and didn't receive the same recognition. Dale feels that ICT should be the industry leading flexible and mobile work given the technology options available, yet many women

in the industry struggle to gain support for flexible workplaces. While change is happening, the pace is still too slow for ICT to have become an attractive industry for women.

Dale now actively seeks out the views of women in his team, learning about their experiences, the challenges and roadblocks they face, and inquires about the support they need. Everyone's journey is different, he reflects:

Some of those women said to me 'Dale, I don't want you to do anything special for us, I don't want you to make [me] an example'. My response is 'I'm not providing any special treatment; I just want to make it fair and equal for you. I want to make sure you know that we value you, want to hear from you, and that you have the support to stand up and to aim for whatever you want to try and do'.

He is also inspired by women such as Claire Foo, from the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), one of few female CIOs in government, and a strong advocate of linking gender diversity to strategic outcomes. Dale says:

The evidence that diversity delivers more innovation and breakthrough thinking becomes real when Claire is in the room. It's a different conversation, a better conversation, but one that is challenging to some.

Having a male and female voice in the CIO leadership rooms to challenge the status quo is elevating the conversation. Yet Dale admits there is still a long way to go.

Engaging men in the diversity challenge

The economic argument for diversity is well documented. Research continues to show that diversity generates breakthrough thinking, enables organisations to be more innovative and improves financial performance.

Men are a critical resource to achieve diversity and inclusion. They often occupy senior roles, and hold significant power, so their efforts to advance diversity and inclusion in the workplace are essential. Dale agrees that engaging men in the diversity journey is vital, and there are many men we need to connect with.

Dale has heard that men don't get involved because they want to

maintain their influence and want to 'keep women in their place'. That could be true in some cases, but it's not Dale's experience. While he's always had a strong sense of fairness on an individual level, he didn't necessarily connect with the issues of diversity until more recently when he was invited and welcomed into the conversation. The supportive approaches of thoughtful managers and movements like the HeForShe campaign launched by actor Emma Watson at the United Nations had a profound effect on him. He said it was the first time he'd heard loudly that, as a man, he was welcome and gender equality was his issue too.

There are a lot of men that are still uncomfortable in that conversation; they haven't made their own connection with the stories of how women have struggled, and they haven't seen the positive impact their actions can have when they adopt a different view.

Men can be liberated by the diversity conversation. The greatest regret of many men is that they haven't spent enough time with their families.

When men can personalise the benefits of gender equality, they are more likely to advocate for women, Dale believes. If you have a daughter you would not want her to grow up in a world where she is denied access to any career she wishes to pursue, where she misses out on promotions and is paid less than her peers simply because she is a girl. Dale reflects:

I've got a baby girl and I want to show her all the things in the world, and give her all the opportunities in the world. I want to her have everything that she wants.

Many men are also realising that the work practices organisations offer women have incredible appeal for them too. Policies around parental leave and elder care, flexible work conditions, working from home, and the introduction of mentoring and networking programs are often initially driven by and targeted at women. But these are changes that men increasingly want to access as the concept of fatherhood changes. We no longer live in a world where men are excluded from attending the birth of their children, where breastfeeding is done behind closed doors, and where women are expected to forfeit their careers once they started a family. These days, it is more accept-

able, even expected, that men play a greater role in the care of their children. The 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics census statistics indicated that 23 per cent of men took advantage of parental leave policies. Samone McCurdy's seminal research into the barriers to caregiving for working dads found that 85 per cent of fathers agreed they would step away from work to look after their baby for three months or more if there were no financial barriers.*

VicRoads can be an organisation that liberates men, says Dale; men don't have to have regrets about not spending enough time with family. Dale believes leaders have a large role to play in fostering a culture of acceptance for fathers to actively contribute to the care of their children, in line with their and their partner's work and career aspirations. There's nothing like seeing a male senior leader accessing flexible work hours; working part-time to take on a greater portion of carer duties; leaving early to pick up their children from school; or working from home to care for a sick child, to break stereotypes around gender roles in caregiving. It is empowering for men and liberating for everyone.

Similarly, VicRoads' mentoring program is something that benefits men, as well as women. As a mentor to several women through the My Mentor program, Dale has gotten to know a whole range of women and has learned as much from them about their experiences, as they have from his guidance and support.

The energy and positivity at the My Mentor induction and graduation events were palpable. The sense of achievement and growth linked with great possibility was heartwarming. Who wouldn't want to be a part of that?

Flexibility in practice

The Information Access section in the Information Management and Technology division (IM&T) was physically remote from its customer base and was seen as disconnected from the rest of the organisation. When the team was relocated to the Spring Street office, managers

* Breekveldt, *Career Interrupted – How 14 Successful Women Navigate Career Breaks* (Melbourne Books, 2015). McCurdy wrote the chapter “‘You Did What?’ Taking the Daddy Track’.

took the opportunity to design their workspace differently. The goal was to promote greater interaction and collaboration with customers. A workspace based around the team's activities seemed like the answer. There are fewer desks than people and people can't claim a desk space as their own. Instead, they have lockers and choose their workspace when they arrive in the office. They may end up working with different people next to them every day, possibly some from other teams. They may decide to work from home or from another office on other days. Staff is consulted, issues and concerns raised are resolved, and people love the new way of working, says Dale. Overwhelmingly, the benefits have outweighed the negatives. The new workspace has increased the connection with customers, increased knowledge of the business and encouraged greater collaboration across teams.

One of the managers in the area, Roger Clark, has been a strong promoter of a flexible workplace. It's not something that just happens by putting a policy in place. It requires managers to be more than supportive; they're proactive and have thought through the challenges of managing numerous staff members in varied, flexible working arrangements. Roger is that kind of leader.

It's about changing the thinking from being able to apply for flexible working conditions, to it being an expectation that everyone's role is flexible and finding ways to make it work for people.

Roger saw significant benefits in increased job satisfaction and an improved work-life balance of his staff. He has had conversations with his entire team about the kinds of arrangements that could work for them, and puts plans into action. He also models flexible working himself, and has documented the challenges and feelings he has experienced, like isolation and missing out on social events, and not being face-to-face in meetings. These are issues that he discusses with his team to improve their sense of inclusion. He finds technology assists in keeping the team connected, particularly through Sametime technology, and continues to schedule in time for face-to-face communication across the group.

One of the team leaders has a young family and lives in the northern suburbs. She works from home one day a week and from an office close to home on another. Her varied work arrangements mean she

could be sitting next to anyone in her team, or from other teams. This enables her to meet more people, talk to her customers, and meet her family commitments for day care drop-off and pick-up. Flexibility is not seen as just a perk for some women, but a natural way of working for everyone.

Providing flexibility for team members can be a juggling act for a manager, especially if it is a large team. Roger says:

It's not without challenges and it takes more planning and organisation, but some staff members are saving significant travel time that they can spend with family. It has the added benefit of making better connections with our customers when you have staff working in different offices. Being there, hearing their challenges and understanding their operational requirements adds enormously to what the data services team can deliver for the organisation.

The impact on staff members is noticeable: they are less stressed, more engaged and committed, and highly productive.

In everything we do at IM&T, we will prioritise how we empower our staff and provide a great experience for our customers. That is an overlay on everything that we do, not just something that we might think about from time to time.

Back to Dale's team. Dale is supporting a range of diversity initiatives, including exploring equal gender targets for shortlists during recruitment; requiring recruitment agencies to put forward equal numbers of men and women for contract roles; providing secondments and job swaps to other government departments; inviting more men to discussions with women about the barriers and challenges they face; and supporting a greater take-up of flexible and part-time working arrangements by men and women.

Perhaps Dale's experience of learning from female mentors is another initiative from which other men could benefit.

The IM&T division has recently named meeting rooms after two female inventors. One was Marie Curie, renowned for her contribution to radioactive medicine, but who also raised two daughters as a single mother after the early death of her husband. The other inventor, less well-known, Grace Hopper, was the co-inventor of the computer programming language COBOL.

These amazing women in history should be inspirations to all for their groundbreaking thinking and scientific contributions, but particularly to other women in ICT, to show that their contributions will be valued and there should be nothing to hold them back.

Where to from here?

In Dale's opinion, 2016 has been a very challenging year for VicRoads. The leadership is trying to break down the cultural legacy of the past and transition from an organisation that valued itself by its technical proficiency, to one that is focused on its people and its customers. It is a tough journey and it takes a lot of hard work to shift long-held beliefs and behaviours. For change to stick, everyone has to work together. This includes leaders having the courage to hold tough conversations with people who resist change and who continue to behave in an unacceptable way, and allowing people who will never be on board to leave the organisation with dignity. After all:

'Flexibility is not seen as just a perk for some women, but a natural way of working for everyone.'

People are really important to what we achieve, they're our most important asset and making people feel good about coming to work is something that, as leaders, must be at the top of our list.

In the last decade, the revolution in communication and technology has immeasurably changed the way work is performed across VicRoads. Employees are all provided with access to flexible work options, not just women returning to work after a maternity leave. Mainstreaming work flexibility enables VicRoads to reap productivity benefits, improve engagement, reduce absenteeism, and achieve cost savings. It is a powerful strategy for attracting and retaining talent.

Ultimately, a diverse workforce does not limit its access to the best available talent; it just makes good business sense to support diversity and flexible workplaces for all. The leaders at VicRoads need to encourage men to join the diversity conversation for their own benefit, as well as those who work for them. With a welcoming workplace, together we can explore the unconscious and conscious biases

and stereotypes that limit women, and stop pigeonholing women with families as employees who probably won't rise to senior positions.

The ultimate measure of success is when we are truly representing our staff and our community: when everyone feels they are valued regardless of their level in the organisation or who they are – male, female, Indigenous or from another culture – and they enjoy coming to work. Then there will be no more need to have these conversations.



Norah Breekveldt

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