

Inspiring Women Series 2019 - Alita McPhee, Hydrogeologist



WIMnet NSW recently caught up with Alita McPhee, a Senior Dewatering Specialist whom recently set up her own consulting business, Vexa Engineering with customers in WA, NT and QLD. Alita talks pay rises, starting your own business and work / life balance.

How did you become a hydrogeologist and tell us about Vexa Engineering?

I was one of those kids who liked being outdoors and playing in the dirt. Then, when I was 12, I represented QLD in a national softball tournament. It was held in Gove; NT and we did a tour of the bauxite mine. I loved it and thought it would be a cool place to work. I didn't really think about it again until I was picking university preferences and I was drawn towards science. I haven't looked back since and I was right. It is a pretty cool place to work.... most of the time.

I started my mining career in 2003 in consultancy, which provided exposure to many different disciplines, projects and career paths. It also provided me with a broad but solid technical base from which to grow and develop. After 7 years and deciding hydrogeology was what I enjoyed most, I commenced working directly for mining companies – start-up and operational mines and processing facilities throughout Australia and Western Africa. My previous roles include Dewatering Specialist at Rio Tinto and Senior Hydrogeologist at African Minerals, Fortescue Metals and GHD.

Now, I'm a Senior Dewatering Specialist and Director of Vexa Engineering. Vexa Engineering provides consulting services and custom designed equipment to the mineral extraction industry for the management and abstraction of water. Customers come to us when their dewatering system is failing and impacting mine progressions, or the water supply system is underperforming and impacting processing. We update, improve and standardise the infrastructure (equipment) and operating philosophy to increase reliability, efficiency and reduce running costs.

Are you involved in the community in any way, or do you want to be?

As part of my role while working in Africa I was involved with a lot of community work and teaching of the local staff. I really enjoyed this type of work and since returning to Australia have realised how much I am missing giving back. I'm looking forward to finding an organisation I can dedicate my time to, which would benefit from my skill set.

For about the last decade, mentoring has been a large part of my role. It's something I don't really think about when I'm doing it but on reflection, I'm aware how important it is and how much I enjoy it. *(Interviewer's Note: Alita informally mentors a number of young female technical professionals in the NT).*

Can you elaborate more on how you went about asking for that Senior pay rise? Was it the right way and if not, how would you do it again in the future?

I have had two situations that stand out where I've had to address my remuneration. The first wasn't very successful as I walked in and demanded a pay rise with little to no thought. The second time had a very different outcome. In a new role, I did not really understand how my skill set and experience compared to the others in my industry. It did not take long for me to realise I was definitely being underpaid. It took a huge

amount of courage, but I requested a meeting with my Superintendent and then prepared the key points as to why my pay rate should be reviewed (something I did not do well the first time). It was a well thought out discussion and my Superintendent informed me he would review it. Within a month I was promoted to senior hydrogeologist, which was a newly created role with another amazing female hydrogeologist.

Why did you start Vexa Engineering?

To allow more flexibility in my work. I wanted to start a company that allowed me to continue working in a field I love but from wherever I wanted in the world. I had spent over 10 years FIFO and felt I needed more stability. I am probably working more now than I ever have before, but I am enjoying being challenged every day. Whether it is personally, technically, financially and everything in between - each day brings a new challenge and a new learning.

How did you get Vexa Engineering off the ground and were there any challenges?

Lots of challenges and as I have only been operating for just under a year there continues to be challenges every day. Some days they are small and others they feel completely overwhelming. But as with anything in life, once I stop and break the problem down or simply spend more time sitting with it, I find a solution and move forward. I am very grateful I also have 2 business partners who already have a successful engineering company to bounce ideas off and consult. I also have an amazing group of women business owners including my mother, sister and close friends who are always happy to talk through issues.

Have you achieved your ideal work / life balance?

I love to travel, and I love the beach. Switching off is something I am learning to do at the moment and part of the point of starting a business was to have a better work life balance. I would not say I am exactly there yet, but I am a lot more self-aware then I have ever been before.

Are you working on any personal and/or professional development?

I am constantly growing personally and professionally. I try my best to put a few hours aside each week for both professional and personal development. Each week I pick something different. Last week it was to develop my project management skills further, the week before an area of my technical skills I feel needed work.

Who are your role models?

My mother is a massive role model to me. She went back to night school to obtain entry into university when I was only young. She then completed her Bachelor of Business (Accounting) degree and went on a few years later to purchase the accounting business she had worked in for the previous 10 years. She was in her mid-40s and I was 21 when she became a small business owner. I have watched her balance work, community service, family and her social life amazingly well. She is a formidable woman who I am very grateful to have in my life.