

IAF SPACE EDUCATION AND OUTREACH SYMPOSIUM (E1)
Enabling the Future - Developing the Space Workforce (5)

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BALANCING THE FUTURE SPACE WORKFORCE: A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

The aerospace sector has traditionally presented an unbalanced representation of women at different hierarchical levels. Recent international research on diversity management is increasingly highlighting the role of unconscious bias across various stages of the recruitment and promotion process, which is greatly contributing to the reduction of diversity both in the hiring process and throughout employees' careers, therefore perpetrating these unbalances. Researchers have highlighted the need for all participants in the labor workforce to revise their assumptions and become aware of behaviors which naturally occur in every aspect of their lives. They have also shown how diversity training and awareness are not sufficient if these unconscious biases are not explicitly handled head-on. Several steps have been proposed in order to improve gender balance within firms and industries by taking into account unconscious bias. Some, such as ensuring a pool of suitable female candidates, by encouraging women in STEM at lower and higher education, are not directly under the control of space companies and agencies. Others, which will be the focus of this paper, directly address different phases of the recruitment and career advancement processes. These include, for example, the language and tone used to write vacancy notices, the examination and screening of interview candidates, the composition of interview boards, the offers extended and the internal performance review and promotion processes. This article starts with a review of the status quo in gender balance in the aerospace industry, including a recent history and evidence of the changes that have occurred. It then proceeds examining how recruitment and promotion processes are enacted by drawing on a representative sample of European space companies and more than 600 female students and professionals employed in the sector in Europe, affiliated with the association Women in Aerospace - Europe. In the light of the findings, the paper also proposes best practices and concrete steps for companies to improve their gender imbalances by becoming more aware of and tackling unconscious bias in the workplace.