



Am I a Ground Breaker?

By Mimi Lufkin, Chief Executive Officer, National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity

Our world is becoming increasingly smaller and our economy more global. These changes create an ever-widening range of careers.

In working through your career exploration process, you may want to develop skills and gain experiences that will increase your knowledge of occupations and widen your career options. Part of that widening process is being sure that you don't set artificial barriers for yourself regarding your own career choices. Employment in many sectors of our economy has been traditionally segregated by gender, an artificial barrier that many are working to eliminate. Old stereotypes about what careers are for men and what careers are for women do not apply anymore. We cannot afford to lose half the potential workforce in any career field due to outdated notions.

Explore Before You Choose

The 16 Career Clusters provide a framework you can use to explore all aspects of a particular career field. Within each cluster, there are multiple pathways, and within each pathway, there are a variety of occupations. Some of these occupations are considered “nontraditional,” which means that

less than 25% of one gender is employed in that field.

Your career choices should be made based on your interests and skills. The Career Clusters framework provides you with the opportunity to explore a wide range of career options regardless of your particular background. As you consider career options, do not allow yourself to be steered away from a cluster or pathway because of your lack of experience. As you go through the career exploration process, you may take a career interest inventory like the one that begins on page 4 to help you focus your career choices. But be aware that many of these assessments are based on your experience with typical activities within careers. It is very important that you take the opportunity to explore career choices and build your portfolio of experiences before you start to narrow your options.

Follow Your Dreams

As you explore the multiple career options within each Career Cluster, listen to your instincts about what careers will utilize your interests and skills, regardless of who is typically employed in that field. There may be times when you

might be discouraged from following your dreams because your career choice does not fit in with traditional gender roles. In the long run, your choice of a career that fits you will provide you with a more satisfying and fulfilling future. And the good news is that research shows that men and women are increasingly moving into, and succeeding in, nontraditional careers. Regardless of the career you chose, do not let anyone's prejudices, including your own, limit you!

Consider a Nontraditional Career

The biggest argument in favor of working in a nontraditional career is the intrinsic benefit of following your dreams and the satisfaction that comes from a job well done. As a “groundbreaker,” you will help overcome gender stereotypes and open the door to others. There is nothing more satisfying than knowing you have made a long-lasting impact on society in addition to doing what you enjoy. For women, participating in a nontraditional career can carry with it significant financial rewards. Male-dominated occupations tend to have higher wages and benefits. When women



are employed in these areas, it can mean over 25% more annual income. For men, nontraditional career choices can also mean higher wages, especially in the health care fields, as compared to many other career choices.

Choosing to be different always carries with it some challenges. However, as daunting as some of these challenges might appear, the workplace is continuing to become much more diverse. A lack of role models and others who support your nontraditional career choices can be discouraging, so it is important to surround yourself with those who support your choices and to find champions who can mentor and guide you. In some traditionally male careers, the physical demands of the job can be significant. But with the proper preparation, understanding of physical dynamics, and the use of appropriate tools and technology, these barriers can be limited. Certainly carrying a 30-pound toddler on your hip while doing housework has its physical challenges, too!

Central to the current global challenges we are facing is the growing need for a workforce with

skills in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). A majority of these career fields are nontraditional for women, and in recent years there has been a decline in women's participation in some of the engineering- and math-related career areas, a loss of human potential we cannot afford. As we have seen the performance gap shrink between boys and girls on standardized assessments in math and science, we have not seen the translation of that success to college preparation and career selection. The opportunities for women in STEM careers are endless.

Most of us carry around the image of an engineer as a white male with wild hair, thick black-rimmed glasses, pocket protector, and white dress shirt and tie, who sits in front of a computer all day running endless mathematical equations. But this image is far from reality. Engineers can be any individuals who are willing use their imagination and analytical skills to invent, design, and build things that matter. They are team players with independent minds who ask, "How can we develop a better recycling system to protect the environment, design a school that

can withstand an earthquake, or create cutting-edge special effects for the movies?" By dreaming up creative and practical solutions, engineers are changing the world all the time.

Don't let your preconceived notions of what career is a fit for you limit your choices. Take the opportunities provided to you by exploring all of the 16 Career Clusters to expand the options you want to choose from. Who knows, maybe you might even choose a nontraditional career!

Resources

The National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity
www.napequity.org

The STEM Equity Pipeline project
www.stemequitypipeline.org

Engineer Your Life
www.engineeryourlife.org

Nontraditional Career Resource Center
www.ncrc.rutgers.edu