

TECH-DRIVEN, RECESSION-PROOF: INDUSTRIAL PROJECT MANAGEMENT IS A CAPTIVATING CAREER

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'Industrial.' To the uninitiated, it evokes visions of cold warehouses, blokey banter, and concrete and steel for days.

But as Stefanie Frawley and Rulla Haifa explain, these notions are not only outdated – they disguise career opportunities for women who are at the forefront of diversity and innovation. Not to mention, well paid.

In this article, we home in on what it's like to be a project manager in the industrial sector – a career path that puts you in the thick of the action.

Careers with purpose

'I thought I'd hate it. I thought it was going to be all dull steel and concrete boxes. But industrial is so much more than that.'

This is how Rulla Haifa, Associate Director at TMX Global, describes her transition from the hotel sector into industrial project management – which was triggered by the COVID pandemic.

Rulla's experience is typical of how archaic impressions of the industrial sector can discourage women from entering industrial project management – a field of work that is strategic, interesting and rewarding.

'There is a lot of purpose behind what we do. Our work impacts every single person – and affects how we all live our day-to-day lives.'

What is an industrial project manager?

Industrial project managers oversee the briefing, design and delivery of industrial facilities. The type that supports the logistical requirements of big businesses – like manufacturers, retailers, third-party logistics (3PL) providers and fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) suppliers.

Facilities can be small – like a simple shed – or as large as a 100,000m², fully-automated warehouse.

But according to Rulla, overseeing the delivery of the physical build is just one aspect of the job.

'A project manager really manages the expectations of all parties on a project,' she explains. 'To do that, they oversee budget and design to ensure that both align with the client's project brief.'

On any given project then, the project manager manages the expectations of:

- The client
- The project team – builders and design consultants
- Internal client streams and stakeholders – like operations, procurement and OH&S

For TMX Global, clients include household names like Coles, Officeworks, and Couriers Please.

If the thought of so much responsibility is daunting, it helps to know you're never operating alone.

'At TMX all of our projects have a project director overseeing the project and the project manager – who manages the job day-to-day,' explains Rulla.

'More complex assignments can have up to three or four project managers, depending on the project requirements.'

Putting people first

Given the high-stakes collaborations involved, strong interpersonal skills – like the ability to strike up and maintain relationships – are essential to your success as a project manager.

'A good project manager is a good people person,' says Rulla. 'The better you can nurture relationships, the more everybody enjoys working with each other.'

'And when a problem comes up – because it definitely will – there's a stronger chance of everyone coming together to solve the issue in a mutually beneficial way.'

So, what are some of the daily challenges that project managers deal with?

Inclement weather. Changes to project scope (and flow on effects to budget and schedule). And dare we say it, pandemics.

So another essential skill project managers need is a diligent approach to process development, administration and documentation.

'We all hate admin' says Rulla. 'But it's one of the most important things we can do as Project Managers. It traces conversations and helps us keep track of key decisions made during the project lifecycle. It also informs reports which are a key way for stakeholders to communicate through their businesses.'

Versatile, varied, valued

Project management is a brilliant career if you love variety and a fast pace. But project management in industrial gives even more value to women who want a fulfilling career they can sink their teeth into.

To begin with, no two projects are the same – even if they're operating within the same sector. And if you love meeting interesting and diverse people, you'll get to interact with them daily.

But industrial project management is mentally stimulating in ways few other industries can be.

Take, for example, the break-neck speed of innovation employed across the industry in robotics, AI, augmented reality and digital twins, and data and analytics.

And then there's the chance to be part of an industry that affects everyone at almost every daily touchpoint.

Stefanie Frawley is a Director of Portfolio Management at TMX Global. She's built a career in industrial spanning over 20 years and is incredibly passionate about the industry's opportunities for women.

'Everything we do is touched by industrial in some way. And being within the four walls of a facility – watching everything that's going on – is so interesting.'

'And it's recession-proof. There's always going to be a requirement for products to be manufactured, stored and distributed.'

This point is especially significant. Women are at higher risk of losing their jobs during global events. According to the Grattan Institute, women lost their jobs at twice the rate of men during the COVID pandemic.

So career security served with a side of strategic thinking, networking and creative problem-solving, is not just a 'nice to have.' For women, it's essential.

A male-dominated field no more

It would be ridiculous to try and deny that industrial project management has traditionally been dominated by men. But does that legacy remain?

According to Rulla, no.

'Look, we've still got a long way to go. But it is changing. And that's because there's an increasing amount of support from the men in this industry to get more women in.'

Stefanie agrees. 'There's more willingness from men to support women who want to enter the industry.'

'But I also think industrial just hasn't been a career of choice in the past for women. And that goes right down to the school level.'

'The first touchpoint many women have with industrial is at university. However, by that stage, they've already chosen a career path. That's why it's essential to educate career counsellors and students about the industrial sector and its career prospects.'



How to switch to industrial

If you don't work in industrial – but would like to – there are ways to jump into the industry from adjacent fields. Fields like construction management, architecture, town planning or quantity surveying.

Pairing your existing qualifications with a certification in project management is a smart way to move into the industry. And to develop a skill set that you can apply across a swathe of sectors.

Rulla's advice?

'Connect with somebody who's in the industrial sector. Ask if you can get out to a site to see it for yourself, as witnessing it with your own eyes is the ultimate way to validate the possibilities.'

Want to connect with women working in industrial – and learn first-hand what it's all about? Connect with Women in Industrial on LinkedIn.