interview

More female technologists in the workplace would close the skills gap and boost UK plc's economic leadership, Women In Technology MD **Maggie Berry** tells Aasha Bodhani. Photography by Phil Adams.

"DID YOU KNOW women represent only 18 per cent of the IT workforce?" asks Maggie Berry, managing director of industry body Women in Technology. "I want to change that," she adds emphatically, before revealing that despite this statistical imbalance, she's convinced that corporate businesses are genuinely keen to encourage gender diversity.

Although Women in Technology is broadly focused on the technology sector, not just ICT, Berry is establishing a reputation in the IT world as the figurehead of the organisation. In August 2011 Berry was cited The International World of Difference Award. The annual awards recognise women for their efforts to support women's economic empowerment and advancement in society and business.

Berry's organisation's mission is to "help women build successful and satisfying careers in the technology profession, as well as work with companies to put diversity at the forefront of their recruitment and employment policies". These are laudable aims but, as Berry admits, the question is of

redressing restrictive gender imbalances in the 2011 workplace.

"We feel encouraged that the coalition government put its faith in IT entrepreneur Martha Lane Fox to be its champion and chief advisor on all things Web-related, for example, but strong and inspiring female role models in the IT world are few and far between," Berry says.

Attracting women to IT

"A poll from last year's 360°IT conference revealed the industry still faces a massive dearth of women in IT jobs, with three-quarters responding that their organisations are not doing enough to attract women into IT, and only 5 per cent saying enough is being done. Depressingly, the remaining fifth responded that there were already enough women in IT so no more needs to be done."

It is perhaps not surprising that such a low percentage of the IT workforce in the UK is female, Berry concludes. Women in Technology currently has a network of 7,000 members and occasionally men have applied for roles via the website.

Berry's argument is supported in part by findings from bodies such as The Smith Institute, which suggests that the UK economy loses billions of pounds when qualified women scientists, technologists, and engineers leave for work in other fields or become unemployed. This unused resource needs to be developed and re-introduced into the skills market if the UK wants to remain one of the world's leading economies.

"I'm not a technologist myself – I do not need technologist skills to bring female technologists together," she says. Berry's career began in technology recruitment for the financial services sector at McGregor Boyall Associates, a financial services recruitment consultancy, and later at bank Natwest. Having witnessed the lack of women filling technology roles, she was given the task to change this as part of her McGregor Boyall role.

"I was given a URL and an idea," she recalls. "Then it was my job to make it work." Berry went on to develop her knowledge of the issues involved by **>**

Maggie Berry:
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Women in Technology networking events provide opportunity for women technologists to meet and share market knowledge

< research and speaking to companies and meeting technical candidates. Women in Technology launched in 2005.

"We have taken direct feedback from female technologists, asking what support they need, and from businesses looking to change their recruitment polices," she says. "Thinking back to when I set up the organisation, the idea I had isn't necessarily what is has grown into."

Women in Technology is part advisory bureau, part networking agency, bringing together businesses and female technologists. It is this interface, Berry believes, that is the crucial missing part of the process that has resulted in women not connecting with career opportunities, and with employers not knowing how to identify the skills they need. Beginning as a basic information portal for women, Women in Technology now offers a range of services, from online job board and recruitment channels, to networking events and personal development.

The rise of IT has certainly changed women's roles in the workplace but, despite the radical change, both scientific and anecdotal reports suggest women still face inequalities with career progression.

The Smith Institute claims that in 2008 there were 620,000 female science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) graduates but only 185,000 were employed in these occupations. Digging deeper, the report shows in 2010 nearly 100,000 female STEM graduates were unemployed or economically inactive.

Although disparities are found in other professions, evidence suggests that in the technology sectors the gender gap is greater. According to Berry this is not due to any lack of interest on the employer side. "Companies are crying out for women," she finds, "but they don't see a flow of applications and CVs from them." So how does she account for this apparent contradiction? Berry places part of the problem on women not recognising their skills, combined with companies not encouraging them enough to apply.

Male-dominated industries
Businesses do want to see gender diversity in their technology teams, Berry reports, but the problem lies with industries being too male-dominated and women not having enough confidence to apply.

Women in Technology published a survey in June on what women think the percentage

of the job specification can be fulfilled before applying. They results showed women believe that they should be able to handle 75 per cent of the job specification in order to apply.

"This is a major flaw," Berry says. "This attitude is preventing women from applying, and also leading them to miss out on opportunities. Men don't think the same, and apply regardless of their skill set." Berry's views may sound on the dogmatic side but, she insists, they are based on first-hand knowledge of these issues.

Women in Technology works with client businesses to help change the mindsets of managers and colleagues, by inviting them to networking events and changing their recruitment policies.

Discrimination and victimisation are other reasons why women can often be discouraged from joining the industry. Berry adds: "Working in an environment where firms can be sexist makes it easier for women to quit and then leave the industry all together and go somewhere else. These firms need a lot of help."

'Cyberellas' as role models
The need for women in the technology industry is a worldwide issue, though there are women carrying out front-end technology jobs, there are not enough women working behind the scenes as coders, software engineers, and hardware developers. "There are different perceptions of women working in IT, but what we see are women who have qualifications to work as developers, programmers, and so on, but they apply to roles that don't match their skill set." Berry has said in the past that the need is for more 'Cyberellas' – women with strong IT skills and qualifications who will also be role-models to encourage more women to join the profession going forward.

The problem is not UK-specific; in April a panel discussion hosted by a senior advisor for the Obama administration, Valerie Jarrett, revealed the number of women entering the technology sector remain both "low and stagnant". Jarrett added: "Only one in four technology sector employees are women, and less that 10 per cent of technology start-up companies are headed by women."

Berry is not surprised by this revelation and says the UK is experiencing the same struggles. She finds enlightenment from what affiliated Women in Technology groups around the world are doing – mainly in North America and Australia – as they are more advanced, and she implements their ideas into her own strategies.

The Anita Borg Institute for Women in Technology states women's representation in the IT field is growing. The percentage of women engineers graduating from ITT Bombay has increased from 1.8 per cent in 1972 to 8 per cent in 2005.

Networking opportunities
Not all individuals in the technology industry have degrees which link to their profession; Berry herself is one of them. She has a BA (Hons) in European History and French Language and admits there

has not been a need for it in the career she is in. "I do say you don't need a degree in technology to enter the industry, but individuals will eventually need training and some companies do offer this," says Berry. "This is one of the reasons why Women in Technology set up networking events a year around the UK."

Each event has its own title, with the latest called 'Accentuating Leadership – Female Leaders in the 21st Century'. These events enable female IT professionals to meet and discuss the issues facing the industry and develop their own skills and career path by talking to others. Berry measures the success of the events by the number of people attending and the booking time. "Women who feel isolated in the workplace… can share their experiences and relate to others. The events are great networking opportunities."

The events are not women-only, and Berry encourages men to attend. "Though we are geared towards women, nothing is women-only. I try to make sure we have male panellists or speakers at our events because, let's face it, these are the managers our members will come across all the time." The figures from the last event show 95 per cent female attendees and 5 per cent male.

Women in Technology engages in commercial activity by helping companies attract and recruit women. By sustaining this corporate sponsorship, the organisation can continue hosting networking events and Women in Technology as a whole. "Our biggest challenge now is that businesses seem to expect our service for free. I'm not sure why. Maybe they don't budget for things like this and prefer volunteer groups, but we are offering a niche service. But Women in Technology is a commercial business: it needs to generate revenue to keep going."

Another difficult part of Women in Technology's remit is retaining women who have already established a career, yet who wish to take time out for whatever reason. Achieving this is tougher for women then for men, she says. Berry also points out that

'We have achieved a lot but ideally I want Women in Technology to become a one-stop shop'
Maggie Berry,
Women in Technology

"Taking a long break from the technology industry is practically impossible. Firms should offer a returner scheme, like a graduate scheme, and help women who have been out of work for a while."

Says Berry, "We have only scratched the surface. We have achieved a lot but ideally I want Women in Technology to become a one-stop shop, where women can come to us for anything.

Research by McKinsey Global Institute has shown a link between the number of women in senior positions and strong financial performance, she adds: "In an IT sector that is becoming increasingly crowded and commoditised, organisations need to harness creativity to differentiate,

innovate and stay ahead of their competitors. Bringing more women into the mix can provide fresh ideas, approaches and insights previously unavailable to the organisation."

Berry clearly has a vision for what she wants Women in Technology to achieve – "We have achieved a lot, but have only scratched the surface" – but in some respects Women in Technology's aims are not overly ambitious. An equitable divide in the gender balance is evident in other, admittedly more mature professions, such as law, medicine, journalism, and the sciences.

The possibility of similar balance being achieved in the technology sector within 10 years is not far-fetched. What will happen to Women in Technology if that comes about? Berry is unruffled.

"This is still generations away," she predicts, "but when this does happen we will be here as a support network. Women in Technology will continue to help women gain success in their careers. There will always be a demand for this service." *

BALANCING THE ARGUMENTS
POSITIVE DISCRIMINATION, POSITIVE OUTCOMES?

In 2010 *E&T* magazine sparked up a debate on whether the IET's Young Woman Engineer of the Year Award (YWE) is a much needed opportunity to promote the 'under-represented' demographic or a patronising pat on the head.

Alice Delahunty, past winner of the award and team leader at E.ON's Fleet Management Centre, explains that many girls are discouraged from pursing a technical career by the gender stereotypes that surround them and reveals the YWE Award should be

Do we need specialist recognition for women?

supported and promoted because to miss out on an opportunity to inspire engineering talent is a "misguided effort to be politically correct simply wrong".

Opposing this view, Suzanne Boothman, senior engineer in IT at BAE

Systems, insists that "many male engineers argue that female awards provide recognition to women for doing an equivalent role to their own and this can promote hostility". She adds: "These awards should be open to everyone and should not be based on race, age or gender but for their technical ability."

Predictably perhaps, Women In Technology MD Maggie Berry is in the 'for' camp: "The award is a great tool to boost individuals profiles and shows how women are contributing to the industry."