

outfit on their side,
Alan Hartstein writes

WHEN it comes to equal opportunity for women in the workplace, advances have undoubtedly been made in the past 20 years.

Women are moving into traditionally male-dominated areas in increasing numbers, smashing through glass ceilings.

In information technology, however, recent statistics confirm what many had suspected for a long time: not only do women occupy a small minority of rank and file positions in the industry, but they hold an even smaller number of managerial and executive positions.

According to recent Australian Bureau of Statistics figures, only 16 per cent of all people working in the hi-tech sector are women, even though the industry has matured considerably over the past 10 years.

More alarmingly, the same study finds that only 5.7 per cent of managerial positions in the industry are held by women.

The reasons for this are often complex, varying on a case-by-case basis, but one organisation is actively doing something to address the disparity and offer a support network for women already working in the sector.

Females in Information Technology and Telecommunications is a voluntary group established in 1989 to support the advancement of women in hi-tech jobs.

Led by a steering committee of 16 women, FITT conducts events and activities to promote awareness of the role of women in the industry, encourage new entrants, and support and encourage those already working in the industry.

The committee operates mainly in NSW, which has the largest ICT workforce in the country.

Its total membership is 800, drawn from all industry sectors, levels and skill areas.

Narelle Clark, FITT steering committee member and manager of networks research and development at Optus, says FITT's main objective is to encourage more women to broaden their understanding of the tech sector and share experiences through networking activities.

The most popular of these, she says, is regular guest speaker events.

"Topics embrace both the professional and personal, so we hear the latest research on voice over internet protocol, technology trends, work-life balance and government policy," Clark says. "We also hear the speaker's own story about what barriers they had to overcome, what has worked for them in their career, and what hasn't."

The main purpose of these events is to spotlight the achievements of women in the industry and help them network. There are several reasons why relatively few women work in ICT, Clark says.

Besides being a tough industry to break into, women are often treated as a rarity and subjected to far more scrutiny than their male counterparts, so they may find it harder to progress.

Even more alarming to FITT than the ABS statistics is a NSW Department for Women study revealing that 35 per cent of Year 8 girls choose ICT-related subjects such as maths and



science at school, but only 17 per cent of girls are still studying them by Year 10, representing a 50 per cent decline in take-up.

Clark says there is a structural problem with mathematics and science teaching in schools and for many adolescent girls there is an overwhelming need to fit in.

"Maths and science just isn't part of that formula," she says.

"Going from engineering to marketing is by far easier than marketing to engineering, let alone administration work to architecture."

Clark says the industry's geeky image is mainly responsible for the lack of interest in ICT-related school subjects for girls. "Most young women think the industry is entirely made up of badly dressed, socially inept, myopic young men who spend all their days and nights staring at computer screens eating bad food," Clark says.

It is this misconception that is stopping many girls moving down a hi-tech career path.

"We're eagerly awaiting *CSI: Computer Forensics* or *LA ICT*, in which stylish female ICT professionals save the world," Clark says.

Uni course against the

Alan Hartstein
 Women

GEOMAYRA Silva completed a computer science degree at Sydney University last year.

She knew from a fairly early age that she wanted to do something with computers and was attracted to a career in IT because technology could help people, she says.

"I always saw technology as an enabler and I wanted to experience a lot of the different areas in which IT could be used."

Only about 20 per cent of the students in her course are girls, and in some tutorials, such as software and networking, she is often the only one in a class of 20 or 30, Silva says.

"At first it was a bit daunting being so badly outnumbered, but after a while it ceased to be an issue," she says.

"There was some initial resistance by one or two boys to having a girl in their class but after a while they became very accepting."

After graduating last year, Silva



Enabler: Geomayra Silva secured a graduate position with Protiviti, a US internal audit business risk consultancy with offices all over the world, through a special graduates program run by the university.

