

INTREPID PATHWAYS - ALEX ATKINS

PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND



Formal qualifications

BE (Mining Geology & Mineral Exploration) 2A Hons (WASM, 1989) & BE (Mining) (UQ, 1994)

Current professional role & responsibilities

Senior Mining Engineer/ Special Inspector of Mines (Mining)

I am responsible for inspecting and auditing underground metalliferous mines in WA (specifically focused on seismic mines and mines using paste fill) to ensure compliance with the Mines Safety & Inspection Act 1994 (MSIA) and Mines Safety & Inspection Regulations 1995 (MSIR).

Current employer

State Government (Department of Mines & Petroleum – Resources Safety Division)

Overview of career in the industry

20 years experience including 15 years mostly underground mining experience throughout Australia and Papua New Guinea.

1986 – 1989	WA School of Mines (Geology)
Jan 1990 – Nov 1991	Open pit geologist & exploration geologist in NQ
1992-1994	UQ (Mining Engineering)
Jul 1994 – Dec 1994	Mining Engineer , Newlands Coal Mine, CQ
Jan 1995 - Jan 1997	U/G Production Engineer; Relief Senior Engineer & Services Engineer, Porgera Gold Mine, PNG
Jan 1997 - Jun 1998	U/G Miner (includes airleg/ hand held mining, Osborne Mine, Qld & Mt Morgans, WA (1 st Class Mine Managers Certificate of Competency, 1998)
Jun 1998 - Nov 1999	U/G Long Term Planning Engineer & Relief Technical Services Superintendent, Renison Mine, Tasmania
Nov 1999 – Aug 2000	Mining Engineer & Relief Mine Manager, Kidston Mine, NQ

Aug 2000 – Oct 2003 U/G Production, Planning, Backfill & Geotechnical Engineer, Osborne Mine, Qld

May 2004 – Dec 2006 Project Engineer, Cairns City Council (kids from end 2003)

Aug 2008 – Jul 2009 Senior Mining Engineer, AMC Consultants – U/G, Perth WA

Aug 2009 – present Senior Mining Engineer/ Special Inspector of Mines (Mining), Department of Mines & Petroleum – Resources Safety

EXPERIENCES WORKING IN THE RESOURCES SECTOR

Was working in the resources industry what you expected it would be when you were studying/training?

I had a romantic notion of the industry and didn't foresee many of the "issues" I faced over 15 years working on mine sites. However, starting out at the WASM, Kalgoorlie was a good place to begin as I was first introduced to the cowboy/ macho culture that pervaded mining in the 80's and 90's. It's a lot more civilised these days.

If at any time you left the industry and came back, why did you leave, how long were you gone for and what motivated you to return?

I was away from mining from mid 2003 to mid 2008 – missed out on the big dollars of the boom years! In May 2003 I resigned from a FIFO underground job when I was five months pregnant and there were no flexible work arrangements available. I went back to work on the coast in April 2004 in a civil engineering/ project management role when my baby was seven month, so that I could have a job where I come home at night and get work-life balance.

Initially I thought I'd never return due to the disappointment negotiating maternity arrangements. However after a break and raising a family, I had time to gather myself and strengthen my resolve. I was eventually motivated to return as I missed the industry, felt my education and experience was wasted and still had lots to offer. I also heard about the great pay engineers were getting and returned to \$135kpa (although I worked part-time on return, so pay was 0.4FTE). I also left my husband at this time so I needed the financial independence and to rebuild my confidence. Re-breathing life into my original career was revitalised me.

What is the single most risky step you have ever taken your career? Did you find it paid off? Is there anything you would have done differently?

Leaving Porgera in PNG, where I was getting recognition for my work and opportunities were coming my way, so that I could do my practical underground time so I could get my 1st Class Mine Manager's Certificate of Competency was a big risk. It didn't pay off while I was working on mine-sites; I only used my ticket once at Kidston on a relief basis. I now find it pays off at the DMP as you need to have the 1st Class Mine Manager's Certificate to be a District Inspector. The moral of the story: "good things come to those who wait".

What would you say have been the most significant 'step changes' in your career pathway, and how have you adapted to these?

- Leaving geology to do mining engineering
- Leaving good job to get U/G mining time to get 1st Class Mine Managers Certificate
- Kids: Left UG FIFO mining job and got a job in civil engineering, with 50% pay cut, to be able to get work-life balance as a mother (who became a single mum in the process)
- Come back to mining (& good money) after 4.5 years away. Part time mining consultant (2 days/week). GFC - insecure.
- Found my feet at Department of Mines (3 days/week) and using all my life experience, qualifications and mining experience for a good cause (worker safety).

Have you ever been in a supervisory or senior management position? If so, what are the pros and cons of being in such a role?

Yes. The young boys don't like a small woman bossing them around or knowing more than them (may offend their manlihood?). The older guys with experience are fine.

If you undertook any additional formal study whilst in the industry, did you find it useful in progressing your career?

I completed an MBA by external study – but only got as far as getting the Grad Cert (Management) (*which is 25% of an MBA*). It was very useful to get a better understanding of Organisational Analysis, Change Management & some business concepts. It didn't make any difference to my career/ opportunities. I was told I was "over-qualified" at the last mine I worked at before kids.

What have you found most rewarding about the industry and what would you most like to get out of your career in resources in the future?

To me it's an exciting and romantic industry – especially the airleg mines. The older experienced miners are truly amazing in their resourcefulness and all round toughness. I love the travel – I've seen most of Australia & PNG thanks to mining. It's taught me how to survive in the bush.

The rest of my career will be driven by my greatest passion - keeping the miners safe. The best way I can do that is by using my 15 years of operational experience as a mining & geotechnical engineer to assess what is safe and what is not safe and then drive for a change where things aren't good enough. Having the government stand behind you while you do that is a great thing.

WORKING LIFESTYLE

What are your current work/accommodation arrangements?

Capital city based (with limited travel) - I travel a week per month within WA (working a 3 day week)

Do you have a preference for any particular working arrangement? What have your experiences with different types of arrangements been like?

I love my current arrangement. FIFO great as long you don't have kids but not if you do have them (a good mum should be there for her kids)

What changes or compromises have you had to make in order to balance family or other responsibilities or interests with a career in the industry? Have you found the right balance for you?

Part time is my compromise so I get the balance. Knowing when to "turn off" and focus on the kids – beware taking work home. This is good anyway to avoid burnout (which I experienced before the kids). Nobody appreciates you when you're burnt out.

Has your employer been open to negotiating changes to your role or roster to accommodate non-work interests or responsibilities?

The DMP changed the way it recruits inspectors. I'm their first part-time inspector and first female mining inspector. They understand my need for flexibility and have provided a notebook I can take home if required. They have emergency care rooms at the Cannington office. They have TOIL which I use when I have to go home early to pick up the kids because my parents can't. They have also been supportive of my involvement in The AusIMM WIMnet and the internal Women's Consultative Group at DMP.

BEING FEMALE IN THE INDUSTRY

What challenges have you experienced by virtue of working in an industry that is predominantly male? Do you feel you have had to adapt to 'fit' the industry?

Working in a predominantly male environment I felt that I always proving & pre-proving myself; working extra hard so that nobody could criticise me. I often felt lonely due to the lack of mentors. After 15 years in the industry, just before I had the kids I felt burnt out as a result of cumulative years of frustration with "discrimination" & exclusion – in a very subtle forms as very explicit forms at times (eg. body parts grabbed). But I got through it.

Having a break was very important to be able to realise it *wasn't me* (I was starting to think it was me until I heard other female professional friends recount their tales) and that it was symptomatic of my work environment/culture. I have survived and am very resilient and sure-footed now. I don't care what anyone thinks of me anymore. I am my own woman. Without this journey I wouldn't have become who I am.

Do you feel that you faced any obstacles or discrimination by virtue of your gender in your career and if so, how did you address these issues in order to continue to progress?

Over 15 years in the mines I have experienced being put down (my qualifications/ experience were dismissed), groped, verbally abused & I've been excluded/ shut out from information and decision making (this was worst at the last mine I worked at before the kids). I dealt with it by ignoring it (I wish I had been trained/ prepared for it). When I did complain (once) it had a backlash effect.

I was mostly treated very well by the miners. The abuse came from my professional colleagues (who were threatened by me I think). My partner was jealous so I couldn't mix with the guys I worked with socially and that didn't help.

The trouble with ignoring it (although it stops the escalation & retribution) is that you suffer in silence. This can build up over time and have a negative impact on your overall mental health and well being. Mixed with a bad relationship - I have since left that marriage – this created a very stressful situation.