

## Interview with Leone Penaia, GIS Technician for EPC

Leone graduated from the University of the South Pacific with a degree in Information Systems in 2017. She works as a Global Information System (GIS) technician for the Electric Power Corporation (EPC) in Samoa. She is part of the Quality Assurance & Development Division where she is the only female technical worker in a division consisting of 6 engineers, 9 technicians and 3 apprentices. She is 21 years old and this is her first job.



1. *How did you choose this career?*

I say that the career chose me. GIS is something rather new and one of my favourite subjects at University was Geography which had a large GIS component. So my interest in the subject gravitated me towards a degree specialising on Information Systems with GIS as a major. I was employed not long after I graduated when EPC was advertising for a technician to replace the previous one who has moved on to another position within the organisation.

2. *Did you know about GIS before going to university?*

No I did not. I wanted to be an Environmental Scientist because it was something that was really popular and it attracted a lot of students. Also there was a good career path for Environment graduates given the focus on Climate Change and Global Warming and then I discovered GIS and I found something I was really interested in. Something new with huge potential

3. *What is it like to be the sole female amongst a group of men?*

It is very new to me, refreshing I guess. I get to learn and view their opinions from their perspective as males and I get to share knowledge with them. My male colleagues are very supportive of me and not once do I think, I better do something because I am a woman working with men. Since this is my first job, it is hard for me to compare my work environment to something else but I am enjoying it. There are three of us in the GIS team and we get along really well and then there is the main division consisting of more male colleagues. I do notice that they are very respectful of me and are very careful of their behaviour around me. It makes me feel very comfortable.

4. *Are there any obstacles in you being a female at work?*

I have not come across anything that might make me think like that. I do not have a problem working with males and I am pretty sure my male colleagues do not have a problem either. If

there is anything, it could be them saying to leave the physical stuff to them to do like going out on the field to do pole tagging which require climbing up the poles. But I do want to go out and do physical work as well. So I have asked my boss to give me more work to do even if it is outside my scope.

5. *Do you have a preference on who you work with?*

I guess I prefer woman, there are just some things that cannot be shared with men. You know how the Samoan culture works, there is always that line between what men and women can and should do. It is about what you have been comfortable with and since this is my first ever job, I do not have any experience to reflect on and compare. Maybe when I have accumulated a few years on the job, then I guess I will be in a better position to answer this question. It is nothing against the ability of the person it is just what we have been comfortable with in our upbringing. Girls go with girls and boys go with boys. Also I am still trying to get used to being around men who are not my family so I guess it is something that will eventually die out once I am settled and familiar with my environment. I have only just worked for 5 months.

6. *What is your advice on any female that wants to take up a technical career?*

I say go for it. There are plenty of opportunities to progress as a woman if you can get over the usual labels that come with it. Technical jobs are better paid too and they are very enjoyable, at least that is my experience. Technical roles are also challenging as they bring something that we are not familiar with. What I mean is that, you are brainstorming with men and finding solutions to problems. You forget very quickly that you are a woman amongst men as you apply your thinking and practical knowledge to problems.

7. *Do you think EPC is a gender friendly environment?*

I believe it is a gender friendly environment; I have never felt uncomfortable at work or treated any differently. I do not feel talked down to nor do I get disrespected. I think a lot of it has to do with the guys I work with. They are young guys with families and tertiary educated too, so they are aware of what to do and what not to do. So I believe that for all this gender promotion to work, education is such an important tool. In addition, strong leadership is required to ensure that the right environment is there for every one and that the ethos of a gender friendly workplace is reflected by its leaders. I have been fortunate to have this kind of leadership at work

8. *How do you want to be judged?*

I want to be judged and assessed on my ability as a worker. I do not want any special preference because I am a woman. Because I honestly believe, special rules for women will eventually become counter-productive to what we want to achieve. We want to attract women to technical roles and we have our pride. Any woman (at least the ones I know) who is studying and wanting to take on a career in a non- traditional area will want to be employed because of what they can do not because of their gender.

9. *Have there been any negative reactions from friends and families due to your career choice?*

No, I come from a family of professionals, so to them it is all about what their kids want to do and can excel at. People I associate with do not have a problem, they might ask what GIS is but that is about it. No one has a problem with what I do. I guess everyone has a different experience.

*10. Where do you see yourself in the next 5-10 years?*

I don't have a specific plan but I do know that I would like to advance within the organization in the next 5-10 years. For now, I will do my current job to the best of my ability and I will continue to learn new things so that I'll be able to have not only the skills but the experience to take on more responsibility in the future and to contribute to the success of the organization