

BCSWomen Specialist Group

The BCSWomen Specialist Group initiative was set up by Dr Sue Black FBCS, Reader & Head of School at University of Westminster. Sue, who is one of the many women cleverly balancing home and professional life with four children of her own, had for a long time felt a strong need to encourage women and girls to consider a career in IT. She also wanted to provide some sort of support network for women working in IT. Women working in IT can often miss female contact in their work place.

At a European commission conference: Women in Science and Engineering 'Networking the networks', a few years ago, she discovered the joys of networking and of egroups (electronic groups). Sue set up an egroup for women members of the Central London branch of the BCS in October 1999 which got a very good response. It worked so well that she decided to set one up for the BCS as a whole. It took her over a year to become a full member and get the approval needed from the BCS technical board but eventually, in October 2001, she set up the BCSWomen egroup. The members of the egroup sent hundreds of emails to each other *on*

the first day. The response was astounding! For the first few days members all over the UK, and in fact the world, were introducing themselves to each other and networking in a very exciting way.

The goals of BCSWomen from the start were to:

- Provide an opportunity for networking for women working in IT or studying computing
- Provide support for women working in IT
- Support and encourage women and girls entering IT careers
- Provide a central contact for media channels requiring comment of issues relating to women in IT
- Assist women in IT to find, and become, mentors for other women
- Contribute to BCS policy

The group's eforum enables and encourages BCSWomen to 'chat' about issues relating to their work and interest in IT. A few of the issues which have been discussed so far include: finding advice on particular IT topics, assistance debugging specific IT problems, strategies for job applications and interviews,

assistance accessing data and diagrams from obsolete software, advice on dealing with redundancy and employment rights, managing professional development and maintaining IT skills.

The group has negotiated free membership for BCSWomen to MentorSET which establishes and manages mentoring relationships for women in Science, Engineering and Technology (<http://www.mentorset.org.uk/>). BCSWomen also encourages its members to participate as mentors in this programme.

BCSWomen also encourages professional and personal development for its members in a number of ways, including seminars on current IT topics, CV and job application advice and encouraging participation as mentors and mentees in technical and personal mentoring programmes.

In recent years BCSWomen has also taken on the task of organising projects which seek to promote IT as a viable career for women. Two

major projects under this goal are the Women of Station X project and the Undergraduate Lovelace Colloquium.

The "Women of Station X" or the "Women of Bletchley Park", is the brainchild of the chair of BCSWomen. Sue was horrified that, despite all their hard work, women's achievements at Bletchley Park hadn't been fully recognised historically. A visit to Bletchley Park's museum four years ago triggered the idea. Sue said of the historical exhibits: "I found it fascinating, but it was all about the men that worked there. I thought: we can do something to show what a lovely job was done at Bletchley Park, and that it was done by women." The Bletchley Park project interviews of the women who worked at Station X were done by Anne Day (an oral historian) the original work was completed by Alejandra Gonzalez Beltran on behalf of BCSWomen. This work was passed to Jan Peters (the manager of the BCS Women's Forum Strategic Panel) who agreed to continue the project for BCSWomen when family issues made it impossible for Alejandra to continue,

the interviews were then transcribed by several BCSWomen. This web-based project is now live on the BCS' website at:

'<http://www.bcs.org/server.php?show=nav.9960>'.

The project was initially funded by only the BCS, but that funding has since been matched by the UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology and added to by the European Social Fund. It is hoped that young women and girls will be inspired by the fact that these women were there at the birth of modern computing.

The BCSWomen Undergraduate Lovelace Colloquium will be held in Leeds University on the 16th of June. This is a one-day event open to all undergraduate women in computing and related disciplines in the UK. The day will involve two poster competitions (with real cash prizes), speakers from industry and academia, and will conclude with a social event (featuring cake). It is named after Ada Lovelace a computing pioneer.

The aims of this event are:

To provide a forum for undergraduate women to share their ideas and network

To provide a stimulating series of talks from women in computing, both from academia and industry

To provide both formal (talks) and informal (networking) advice to undergraduate women about careers in computing from a female perspective

Women who wish to attend should submit a poster abstract by the 8th of May. We hope events like this will both provide support to female students who are in the minority in their degree and may feel isolated, as well as encouraging young women to stay within the IT industry after they graduate. Similar events have been organised for graduate students in the past.

Overall the group has achieved a lot over its almost seven years of existence mainly due to the enthusiasm and energy of all its members, especially its hard working and dedicated committee. We have approximately 970 members all of whom are female members of the BCS.

Main website: <http://www.bcs.org/bcswomen>

Chat group:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/bcswomen>

You need to be a member of the British Computer Society (<http://www.bcs.org.uk>) to join BCSWomen. There are several levels of membership, it is easy to join and there are lots of benefits!

If you would like to join BCSWomen, we would love to hear from you. Please email our membership secretary Lucy: joinbcswomen@bcs.org with BCS Women in the subject line.