

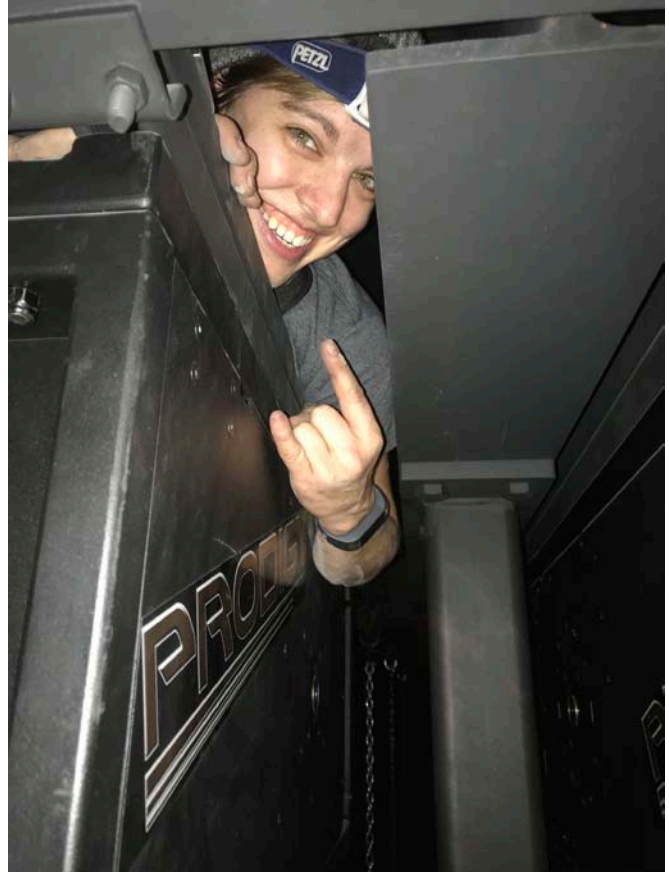
How to succeed as a female in a male-dominated industry

I, LIKE A MAJORITY OF FEMALE-PRESENTING folk in the industry, have been surrounded by men my entire career. It has become so normal that I rarely clock the fact that I am the only female around. I've had coworkers ask how I handle being a female in such a male-dominated field and my reply is usually something along the lines of "I don't know, I just do." But digging down, I think it is a combination of many factors.

“ So how *do* we prove ourselves and advance our careers in the current climate? Here's what worked for me: work hard, learn, network, and back it all up with ETCP certification. ”

I was raised by parents that bucked the “traditional” expectations. My mom got her degree in electrical engineering in the '70s and was usually the only female around. She also has not been allowed in the kitchen since the flaming fish stick incident in which her toddlers' lunches and a microwave were ruined. So, my dad does all the cooking and most of the cleaning while my mom does the majority of yardwork. To me, it wasn't abnormal that I didn't want to do the “girly” things. I liked riding bikes and playing sports. When I got older, I enjoyed playing with bigger toys, like power tools.

I began my career in technical theatre as a scenic carpenter. My first full-time job was at a very large regional theatre. I was not the first female carpenter—the lead carpenter was, and still is, female. I was actually one of three females in the scene shop. But the precedent had been set that the females were good at carving foam. Spoiler: I am not good at, nor do I enjoy, carving foam. It is too abstract for my brain. But the male project managers couldn't comprehend the idea that a woman wasn't good at a creative skill.



Rebecca Knipfer is captured on top of a Prodigy Hoist.

So, I was continually given projects that included foam-carving, which usually didn't end very well.

This is something we repeatedly see—let the ladies do the creative, more abstract parts of the project, like design, while the men do the hard labor. But not all of us are cut out for design and we are fully capable of “playing with the boys.” We have to work twice as hard to prove ourselves and we aren't always given the same opportunities. Yes, it sucks. And, yes, it is changing. But we still must put in a lot more work. So how *do* we prove ourselves and advance our careers in the current climate? Here's what worked for me: work hard, learn, network, and back it all up with ETCP certification.

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Number one is show up, do the work, and do it safely. Work hard and do the tasks assigned to you (again, safely). Don't be afraid to refuse to do something because you feel uncomfortable. If you aren't sure how to do something, ask. No one is aware you don't know something if you don't ask. I would rather have someone ask me how to do a task and be shown a safe and efficient way, than have to redo it or—God forbid—have an accident occur. Also, don't be offended when someone double-checks your work. It's not that you're thought of as incapable, we just want to make sure everything is safe. I very frequently will do an “idiot check” (check that all nuts

and bolts are tight, all shackles and turnbuckles are moused, etc.) before I allow a rig to go out and I ask someone to do it with me. That way, we have at least two sets of hands and eyes on the rig.

Seek out learning opportunities. No one knows *everything*. Be curious and ask questions. Ask why things are done a certain way. Understanding the why always helps to understand the concept better and retain the information. Again, if you don't know how to do something, or are unsure of your solution, don't be afraid to ask. Don't be embarrassed to request a double-check of something. Better safe than sorry, right? Seek out opportunities to learn. Attend workshops and training sessions, find online courses, reach out to others in your field. The pandemic allowed us to create all sorts of online resources. When you find a knowledgeable person in your field that is willing to mentor you, don't let that pass you by. Especially if they are an ETCP Recognized trainer. Recognized trainers are very eager to pass on the extensive knowledge (hence our recognized trainer status). And they have some awesome stories.

“ Having a network of respected industry professionals went a long way in securing my current position. ”



Rebecca Knipfer is shown assisting with the rigging on a production of *Peter Pan* in Marysville, KS.

Which brings me to networking. Having a circle of peers that you trust, respect, and admire is an invaluable resource. I am constantly using workshops, training sessions, and trade shows as networking opportunities. You never know when you could use a second opinion on a design or ask someone to double-check your math. Someone may offer advice on your resume or career path. They could even get you a job one day! Last year I was invited to teach at ETA's Midwest Rigging Intensive. It was a great opportunity



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Keeping your skills fine-tuned requires continuous education. Here Rebecca Knipfer attends the CM-ET chain hoist training.

not only to pass on a bit of my knowledge, but to learn from other industry leaders. I also fully embraced the opportunity to network. Having a network of respected industry professionals went a long way in securing my current position.

And I encourage everyone to get their ETCP certification. It shows that you have the knowledge and the dedication to the industry. It shows you have the aptitude to learn, because that's what the study process is—a learning opportunity. I learned a lot when I was studying for my exams. I still rely on my study materials as reference tools.

All of these, and some wonderful mentors along the way, allowed me to get to where I am today.

I once had a stage manager tell me I couldn't be a rigger because I was too small. Instead of letting that stop me, I just said "watch me." I worked hard, asked questions, and kept learning and growing. Less than a year after she said that to me, I landed my first job as a rigger, and I haven't looked back. That was ten years ago.

I saw a quote the other day on social media: "A strong woman is one who can build a firm foundation out of the bricks others have thrown at her." So, my female-presenting friends, take all those bricks others throw at you at start building that firm foundation.



Rebecca Knipfer is an ETCP Certified Arena – Rigger and Theatre – Rigger and an ETCP Recognized Trainer. She began her career as a scenic carpenter and evolved into a rigger. Rebecca has spent 15 years in the industry and is currently the Marketing Product Manager of Rigging at ETC.