

# SEG Young Professionals Committee: Perspectives

## A Transition Within a Transition: Challenges Facing Many Young Geoscientists

SOPHIE HANCOCK (SEG 2013)

*Editor's note:* The Young Professionals Committee is charged with promoting participation in the Society by early career professionals through increased involvement in activities and events that bridge the gap between students and senior professionals. For additional information, go to [www.segweb.org/yp](http://www.segweb.org/yp).

Sophie has 14 years of experience in junior and multi-national minerals exploration, research, consulting, mentoring, and geoscience education. Her current role is to develop and deliver innovative, intensive upskilling courses that address the opportunity "Geoscientist to Data Scientist." Sophie is vice-chair of the WA State Committee for the Australian Institute of Geoscientists.



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for our industry to be able to discuss this subject openly. The impact of redundancy has been likened to losses such as death or divorce, where the emotional stress can lead to high levels of anxiety or even depression. Further, there is still a stigma attached to being let go, and many people feel shame and embarrassment at having to explain their new circumstances. I had to practice my "pitch" over many networking sessions. It felt more awkward to discuss than I was expecting, in the way that sympathy-provoking topics can be hard to bring up. For several (mostly male) friends, it has taken as long as two years to find a full-time position after losing their previous one. Of course, some people do not come back to the geosciences at all. It has been distressing for me to hear of so many women throughout the exploration industry being made redundant, without apparent consideration for retention of diversity or talent. I believe that exploration and mining companies need to do better.

Following the initial shock, I realized quickly that I was able to avoid taking redundancy too personally, and this allowed me to focus on moving forward. Confidence came from reminding myself of overcoming previous major life stresses, such as preparing for my Ph.D. comps and supporting my loved ones during a family crisis.

A key part of my transition planning was supported by a consultant, whose services I had access to as part of my redundancy package. She provided many helpful suggestions, and her estimate was accurate: three months afterward, I was ready to engage with and create exciting new opportunities. One of the best things I discovered was exploration coffee meetups, without active job hunting—people came to find out what others were doing and if there was a good fit for them somewhere. This takes the pressure off everyone!

My consultant instilled the mindset for strategic networking—to connect with people with a specific goal in mind or, even better, to define a goal and then network into that space. LinkedIn has many great filters and features that can be very helpful during your research. In addition, many positions are first shared here rather than on regular job websites.

During this time of career transition, I was able to consider deeply who I am and what I wanted to do with my life. As many would also say, it was the best thing that has happened to me, resulting in unexpected funds and providing time to reenergize, reinspire, and refocus (indulging in several short courses and rediscovering exploration geoscience). Of course, at the time, my emotions were not quite as regular and predictable as depicted here, and I did have times of doubt and confusion as to what I really wanted for my future. As a person who has put importance on her career, there's no hiding that this was a challenging time.

Next, I want to discuss how I progressed through my transition back to work with a baby. My pregnancy influenced my approach to job hunting and led me to intentionally seek opportunities in the "gig economy" on a project basis. A memorable moment was connecting with Robbie Rowe, who hired me at 34 weeks pregnant! I knew I would need flexibility, so I had a go at being my own boss, although I found this to be isolating without a team around me. I completed several contracts during advanced pregnancy, and later with a young infant I only stopped working completely for six weeks. For my daughter Isla's early life, I worked at night while she slept, and I kept to a highly flexible arrangement, averaging enough time to keep myself connected. Many companies offer "stay connected" paid days to support women during

The start of each new year is a natural time for reflection, and this year I look back over a period of two years of personal growth and consider what I have come to call "a transition within a transition." The first transition was my redundancy in mid-2016, followed quickly by the discovery that our own family transition was also on its way—I was going to become a mother. I will share some thoughts and advice on (1) managing redundancy or, as I would prefer it to be reframed, career sustainability, and (2) career strategies for retention of diversity, including through the parenthood years. I hope that my experiences might be useful for my peers who are thinking ahead and may have concerns, or those who are facing similar challenges, whatever your gender, and for our industry leaders.

Over the last few years working in minerals exploration for a major mining company and being based in Australia, I have seen a lot of redundancies cascade through my peer group, including both myself and my partner. For many people, especially at the beginning, it can be immensely stressful, so it's important

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their maternity breaks, which is great for people taking the full year off.

I have found that the investment made toward my career from both professional organizations and my mentors has greatly contributed to my being able to identify the value of remaining in the industry. For example, I am personally thankful to the GSL and AusIMM, which offer a 50% and a 75% discounted rate for one year to all new parents within their organizations. I challenge the professional bodies who represent all of us within the exploration and mining community to be more generous and creative with how they can offer incentives to new parents, especially women. As a possible option, support in the form of reduced or free annual membership for a year would allow us to keep in touch during times when earnings are often reduced and costs have increased. Furthermore, professional bodies with annual conferences and seminar series could offer

“new parent” discounts. Such measures would make it easier for working parents to keep professionally connected and may limit the loss of talented colleagues.

To complete the arc of transition, I began full-time work when Isla was about eight months old. A benefit of working with entrepreneurs and being based in a coworking space is being able to absorb the culture—my CEOs are committed to flexibility, so I work from home two days a week. It has been wonderful to find my “tribe” of talented people. Being a working parent, I had to consciously manage my thought patterns and “mummy guilt,” which hit in the second month. When needed, I remind myself everything is for the benefit of my daughter and our family. I have profound respect for working parents, particularly mums, with all of the juggling required. A special mention to mums who make the sacrifices necessary to maintain breast feeding.

Since August, I have led two pilot projects that will be implemented during 2018, each tackling an important problem in resources: (1) the growing gap of data science skills needed for geoscientists to remain relevant in an era of automation and digital disruption and (2) the paucity of start-ups founded or owned by a woman which service the resources sector, at 9% in Western Australia. It is inspiring and humbling to have the opportunity to work on fixing important problems and to truly feel that what we do every day makes a difference.

Picking up the broader topic of retaining diversity in resources, I encourage you to watch the enjoyable debate recently hosted by the Gold Industry Group: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=8q2dfHBwDb0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8q2dfHBwDb0). Let's connect and continue these important discussions. 



The Geological and Mining Survey of Argentina and the Geological Association of Argentina warmly invite you to the 15th Quadrennial International Association on the Genesis of Ore Deposits Symposium. The theme of the meeting will be “Ore Deposits: Providing Resources for Present and Future Generations.”

Hosted this year in South America, the symposium presents an excellent opportunity to explore the geology of this region, including some of the richest metallogenic provinces and largest ore deposits in the world.

**For further details, visit [www.15iagods.org](http://www.15iagods.org).**