

Brianna Huber on Women in Leadership, H^{er}₂O™, and the Future of Water

By wH₂O staff

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women in water, smart water, emergency management

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ABSTRACT

Brianna is both the founder/executive director of H^{er}₂O™ and director of Water Filtration at a municipal drinking water utility. She achieves her primary goal of #buildingthefutureofwater by focusing on four important facets of the water industry: **women in water, internships & mentoring, smart water & analytics, and emergency management.** H^{er}₂O™ is an international 501c3 nonprofit with the vision of women equitably involved in water management in every corner of the globe. This transcript provides an interview with Brianna about her inspirational journey in the water sector.

wH₂O: Talk about yourself and your interest in water.

BH: I enjoy physical activity, the outdoors, traveling, and learning. I received a bachelor's in Biology, a master's in Health Science, and I am currently pursuing an MBA in Business Analytics. Science is in my DNA, as my mother was a medical technologist and managed a medical laboratory.

To be honest, I applied for and accepted a job in water simply to get out of the job I was previously holding. I needed a change, saw a job posting for a chemist at a drinking water utility, and applied on a whim out of sheer desperation. Having said that, I will now say that I have no doubt in my mind that water is my final destination and that I am purposefully here. I am most interested in water sustainability, women's roles in water sustainability, and building the future of water.

wH₂O: How did your career journey evolve over time?

BH: During my undergraduate studies, I worked in a hospital-based medical laboratory as a Phlebotomist. Upon graduation, I was promoted to a Laboratory Technologist. After about a year as a hospital-based Laboratory Technologist, I took a position as the Lab Team Leader at a local public health department. About six months after taking this position, I transitioned into a Child Health Consultant position at the same public health department. Seven years ago, I entered the water industry as a Chemist/Lab Supervisor/Asst. Dept. Head at a municipal drinking water utility. I founded Her2O™ in January 2020.

wH₂O: What are some of the challenges you faced working as a woman in a water utility?

BH: The most significant challenge I have faced as a woman working in a water utility is not being included. I am con-

stantly asking to be included in operation updates, projects, planning, etc. At times, it has been necessary for me to insert myself into meetings and projects uninvited.

The second greatest challenge I have experienced is not having my ideas heard and accepted. There have been a few instances where I have proposed an idea, and it was quickly dismissed. However, I do not give up that easily! I find another way, sometimes by buzzing in the ears of my male co-workers. A few months later, they propose the same idea, and it is accepted. This is by no means a good solution, but as I strive to improve the culture for women, it is still important that the best solutions be implemented, regardless of who gets credit for them. I have experienced this in other industry settings as well.

This is incredibly frustrating for a couple reasons. First, from the perspective of equality. Second, from the perspective of resume building. Most employers are looking to see specific reflections of your greatest achievements in your resume. If my greatest or most impactful ideas are never accepted, what am I left to put on my resume?

In addition to not having my ideas heard and accepted, I have also experienced disrespect, discrimination, inappropriate comments, and lack of recognition. I will add that while this male-dominated industry has taught me that I must be more vocal about my ideas and achievements, I am a very humble and introverted person. Speaking up, especially repeatedly about the same topic, does not feel natural or appropriate to me. It feels arrogant and disrespectful of the decision that was previously made. Further, my quiet demeanor is often misperceived as ignorance, incompetence or simply not caring.

Finally, I would like to share one last challenge that I, and many other women in this industry face, and that is judgment, and specifically judgment from other women. At one time or another, we have all thought about how we would have responded differently in a given situation or how we are different from other people. That is simply human nature. However, there is a line between recognizing our differences, and trying to convince or tell someone how to...be, act, respond, or do. I see a lot of the ladder occurring, with women frequently being told how to, and I believe that there is no right or wrong way to handle any situation, there is only what is right or wrong for that individual. As we move forward in improving our industry culture, it may be wise to ask ourselves, is it necessary to tell women how to?

wH₂O: What made you start H^{er}₂O™?

BH: I founded Her2O™ for a few reasons. If we are going to address the global water crisis and achieve water sustainability indefinitely, we need all minds onboard to design and implement a new generation of water and sanitation solutions. Therefore, we cannot afford to stand by and allow this industry to remain male-dominated, utilizing only half of the world's brainpower to sustain it.

Furthermore, I believe women need a global platform to collectively work toward changing the culture of this industry. There are some local and regional women in water and sanitation initiatives out there that are doing great work! I have launched them and witnessed them myself, and they are necessary because every region of the world faces their own unique cultures and challenges. However, I believe that our best chance of affecting geographically-wide and true industry-level change is to work together. One tree, many roots, branches, and leaves. I would love to see those local and regional women in water and sanitation initiatives from around the world join forces with and become members of Her2O™.

Third, women need to be acknowledged, respected, heard, appreciated, and supported for who they are. They do not need to be fixed. Her2O™ is here to help women be their own authentic selves.

wH₂O: What is the goal, scope, vision and mission of H^{er}₂O™?

BH: Our goal at H^{er}₂O™ is to put ourselves out of business, because gender equality in the water and sanitation industry is no longer an issue. Our vision is for women to be equitably involved in water management in every corner of the globe. Our mission is to SEE (stimulate. elevate. embolden.) women's participation in global water management.



“[At Her2O™] We conduct research, raise awareness, create culture, remove barriers, create opportunities, support, and inspire women in the water and sanitation industry. We do not limit how we provide these services.”

wH₂O: What service do you anticipate providing through H^{er}₂O™ (WASH, engineering etc)?

BH: We conduct research, raise awareness, create culture, remove barriers, create opportunities, support, and inspire women in the water and sanitation industry. We do not limit how we provide these services. For example, one way we

support women in water and sanitation is to provide various platforms where women can share ideas and experiences and gain feedback from other women in a safe, non-judgmental environment. These platforms allow women to connect and engage on the level they feel most comfortable with. We also have a mentoring program and provide scholarships, education, and training. Our research program aims to focus on topics affecting women in this industry, from recruitment to retention; we aim to truly understand the wants and needs of women. Our research findings are shared with industry employers and we work with them to create more female-friendly recruitment practices and workplaces. We also work with developing communities to ensure women are included in all aspects of assessing the community's water and sanitation needs, designing and implementing solutions, securing project funding, and developing a plan to maintain the implemented solutions long-term.

wH₂O: Where do you want to see H^{er}₂O™ in the next 5 and 10 years?

BH: I do believe that the wind will take us where we are supposed to be. Having said that, in the next 5 to 10 years I envision the business side of H^{er}₂O™ having an international membership growing at a constant rate, being financially stable, and to have established a few major partnerships and sponsorships. Programmatically, I would like to see the programs we currently have planned to be launched, including our scholarship and ecotourism programs. I would like to see measurable impact regarding women's confidence to be their authentic selves at work. I would also like to see measurable impact regarding men's commitment to understand the challenges women face and reflect on their own role in contributing to those challenges, workplace commitment to improve recruitment practices, workplace environments, and cultures to be more inclusive of women, and intentional commitment and effort to increase the number of women in leadership positions in this industry.

wH₂O: Since you recently launched a H^{er}₂O™ research initiative, can you please talk a bit about this initiative and any interesting preliminary discoveries made at the time of this interview?

BH: H^{er}₂O™'s research program launched in September 2020 with a survey tool entitled Recruiting, Integrating, Supporting and Retaining Professionals in the U.S. Water Industry. The goal of this research is to understand women's and men's experiences in the industry and to understand the wants and needs of both female and male water and sanitation professionals. The research touches on recruitment practices, sexual harassment and gender discrimination policies, benefits and more.

At the time of this interview, and while the data may change by the time the survey tool is closed, we are already seeing some interesting trends regarding the wants and needs of women and men. For example, both women and men thus far agree on the top three places industry employers should

post job postings. However, the barriers to entry into the industry are different for women and men. The top barriers that women feel are most important for industry employers to address to benefit women, are different than the top barriers that men feel are most important to address to benefit men. Both men and women agree that there are not enough female role models within their specific workplace, or within the industry. Finally, when asked to choose the top 10 benefits that industry employers should provide (from a list of 33), men and women agree on 8 out of those 10.

wH₂O: [Anything else about H^{er}₂O™ that you would like to add]

BH: I will clarify that H^{er}₂O™ is a 501c3 nonprofit, and that we welcome men to join as members too. In fact, some of the work we do centers around men. For example, to effectively support working mothers, we must also support working fathers. Understanding and addressing the challenges that men face in the industry is just as important as understanding and addressing the challenges that women face. It is not our goal to create a divide between the men and women within this industry, but instead to create a more cohesive and inclusive working environment for all people involved. Ideally, we will get to a point where all we see in individuals are their skills, talents, and potential, rather than their gender.

wH₂O: What opportunities would you like to provide young women that want to enter water science and engineering fields?

BH: Above all else I would like to get to the point where we can provide young women the opportunity to enter the water and sanitation sector without the baggage of years past gender-related issues. However, it likely will take several years to get to that point. In the interim, I would like to provide the opportunity to truly grow and succeed in this industry, and to feel fully supported and capable of pursuing their hearts desire. I would also like to provide a comfortable environment, flexibility, and security for all women in the industry, particularly for working mothers.



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wH₂O: What is your message to newbies entering or who want to enter the water sector?

BH: My advice to women entering the water and sanitation sector is to be brave, be bold, and be you, because you are wat^her™.



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Globally, the water and sanitation sector is male-dominated. Brianna envisions a future where women are equitably involved in all water and sanitation sectors across the globe through her mission SEE (stimulate, elevate, embolden). Brianna is certain that SEEing women in water and sanitation is her life’s purpose and Her2O™ is how she is fulfilling that purpose.

Follow Her₂O™ on Facebook @her2ointernational or visit www.her2o.org to know more about Brianna and her organization.