



Learning from experience

Pia Wilkes, CEO of the Vehicle Certification Agency (VCA), shares some of her career highlights with us.

Can you tell us about yourself and your role?

I'm from Denmark, and am married with two amazing teenage boys. I've been in the UK for about 20 years now and am currently the CEO of the Vehicle Certification Agency (VCA). VCA is the UK approval authority responsible for ensuring that vehicles meet appropriate environmental and safety standards and I am immensely proud to lead an organisation with such critical role.

So where did it all begin? I studied mechanical engineering at university and topped this up with some additional modules, resulting in a degree which encapsulated finance, business and engineering as well as European law and languages. My interest in languages led me to get involved in a programme to support English and German students coming to our university on 3 month placements, and actually, this is how I met my husband. As part of my degree I was lucky enough to get a 6 month placement at Lotus engineering in Norfolk where I worked in the Type Approval department. After this placement they called me back, offered me a job – and I haven't looked back.

At Lotus I moved from vehicle engineering into technical sales courtesy of the breadth of my degree, which gave me an understanding of wider business processes. That, coupled with my love of dealing with people and the ability to speak different languages made this a logical progression and a great opportunity to develop my skills. Following that, I worked in number of engineering consultancies either helping them restructure or create sales divisions. This path led me to my first visit to VCA. I joined in a business development capacity, and over the following three years helped to put the organisation onto a sustainable cost recovery basis. From VCA I moved into a policy role within the Department of Transport, partly due to a promotion, and partly recognising that my engineering background and sector experience would help to inform the policy development process.

Working at the Department was great but after 3 years of commuting to London I took the decision to move back into the private sector in a testing and technical sales capacity for a big engineering consultancy. This brought me back into more immediate contact with customers in a delivery environment and this is something that I really enjoy.

And bringing things up to the present, I now find myself back at VCA as CEO. It is great to be back and the experience I have gained since my first visit really has equipped me with the broad range of skills needed to lead an organisation with such an important role.

With your degree, you could have gone into a number of industries. Why did you choose the automotive industry?

I think this is mostly down to my dad and to my husband. Dad was a radio mechanic in the Army and from a very early age I remember going into the workshop to watch him fix radio's and bits on cars. A bit later, he set up his own hi-fi shop and as of the age of 9 or 10, I was part of the family business helping out here and there. This started to trigger my interest in engineering and even though my dad was always a big inspiration he never pushed me towards technical studies – that was 100% my own choice. My husband encouraged me to apply to do my work placement at Lotus and after my fantastic experience working there it was hard not to get bitten by the automotive bug and I have worked in the industry ever since.

**What is your favourite part about working in this industry?**

This is a really important industry and one that touches the lives of so many people and in a myriad of different ways. Automotive technology has developed at an incredible pace over recent years and it continues to do so. It is cool to know that I have played a small part in that both during my time in industry and now in my current role running the UK type approval authority. I have been extremely fortunate to work with some of the most exciting products throughout my career and working with some very inspirational individuals who look to improve everything from the style of the vehicle to the efficiency of the powertrain and to explore what the future holds for the automotive sector. So it is a combination of the products and the people involved.

What advice would you give to women who want to start and grow their career in Automotive?

Have a vision and the confidence that you can achieve it and above all, be true to yourself. These guiding principles have been a great help to me throughout my career. If you are offered a job or an opportunity there is a reason for this and you should make the very best of everything that comes your way. In addition make sure you have a great support network – to this day my husband is my biggest supporter and my “rock” through challenges.

What will be the biggest challenge for the generation of women behind you?

The automotive industry is a very fast moving one with new technology coming in all the time resulting in a move towards electrical and digital rather than just mechanical and hardware. It will be important to look at the degree they might pick - looking at electronics and digital as well as standard mechanical options, or a combination of these. Things are moving so fast on the Autonomous and Electric vehicle side and this will require specialist skills in the field.

What do you think is one of the more important leadership skills?

For me, being able to inspire others and being human are some of the most important leadership skills. Throughout my career I’ve recognised the importance of engagement, listening to what people have to say and being open and honest. Furthermore, regardless of who you are, you should absolutely be true to yourself and be consistent – so being authentic. If you work hard and stick to your principles you will reach your goal. For me, having a direct, open and honest approach has not let me down.

Did you have a mentor? Sponsor? How did you develop that relationship?

I have had a number of sponsors throughout my career, mainly managers who were willing to invest in me, providing advice and coaching when I needed it and encouraging me to embrace opportunities to develop. My advice therefore would be to seek out someone who is prepared to sponsor you in this way. And this may not be as difficult as you think, there will always be a boss or colleague you respect, and who may be prepared to find those few extra hours to give you that support you are looking for.

What woman inspires you and why?

I’ve met a number of inspiring women over the years and none more so than some of the ladies I am working with now in the public sector. My current boss really inspires me as she is so grounded, honest and open, and within a short time frame has risen to a very senior position while not losing any of the qualities that helped her to get there.



Other women who inspire me include a friend I grew up with who's a helicopter pilot and built her business from scratch, while raising 6 kids, and my sister who runs one of the larger trusts in Denmark. She had the confidence to follow her dream of becoming an actress and did this professionally for many years: however, after having kids she decided she wanted to move in a completely different direction, which takes a lot of courage.

What is the most exciting thing coming into Automotive in the future

The speed of change and innovation is incredible and this is the most exciting element for me. Vehicles are rapidly becoming so much more than a means of moving from A to B. Making sure we have the robust rooting in the mechanical hardware, while having the ability to understand the digital world and how these two merge is an important facet of the industry.

Why are you excited to be participating with Women at the Wheel?

Anything we can do to encourage more women into the automotive sector is great. The industry provides a great career path and a wide range of opportunities as I hope I have illustrated. I am a huge believer in the power of sponsors and networks. And speaking as someone who has benefited from the support others have given me over the years, it is great to give something back.

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