

Women at the Wheel

Interview with *Caroline Nathan*



How did you start in the industry?

I did my Masters degree and moved to London working at McKinsey. I subsequently joined City University Business school as Alumni Officer for their shipping and finance course. A finance professor spotted me reading *Time Machine* by HG Wells. After some discussion, he suggested I apply for the Caterpillar graduate management scheme as my skills set seemed to be a good match. I applied and was successful, resulting in me moving to Peterborough and starting the Sales and Marketing graduate scheme which consisted of an 18 month rotation programme. I will have been at Caterpillar for 19 years this September – so I must like it!!

Since joining Caterpillar, I have had various roles and some interesting opportunities, covering Account Management, Marketing Consultant, 6 Sigma and currently Product Management. There are lots of benefits and opportunities working for such a large organisation, since Caterpillar has a broad product portfolio as a leading mining, marine and construction machine producer. I have travelled the world with my job, including North America, Brazil, China and much of Europe. I also completed my 6 Sigma Black Belt qualification through the Caterpillar Black Belt programme and achieved an Advanced Diploma in Marketing with the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM).

What is your current role and what has been the biggest challenge in this role?

Most recently, I moved to product management, focusing on direct and cross-functional team leadership and process improvement. I am currently an NPI (new product introduction) product manager for engines and head up the team that develops global engines; with my current project aligned to EUs stringent legislation. NPI (or NPD – new product development) includes being responsible for securing internal funding and overseeing all aspects of bringing it to market, including financials, engineering, product, manufacturing and market support.

Managing a virtual, multi-functional team has been one of my biggest challenges e.g. working in a detailed engineering environment without an engineering background means I need a certain level of understanding but also need to surround myself with people I trust in my team to help me make my decisions.

Another big learning point, or advice I would give if I had my time again, is to have more confidence in my abilities and talents and respect what I bring to a technical project as a business person. My most recent mentor has drawn attention to the fact my commercial background can add real value in a technical industry. There is also no such thing as a stupid question, only stupid answers. I found this great advice! Asking questions can generate new ideas and help make sure everyone is at the same level of understanding and a key aspect of diversity.

What is your favourite part about working in this industry?

For me, this is a very exciting, diverse industry. It is fast paced, with highly complex new products being introduced every four years depending on emissions cycle.

Incorporating digital and innovative requirements also means the level of technological advancement moves quickly.

I develop engines, but those engines go to such a broad range of customers e.g. hospitals, tractors and heavy machinery. I like making a difference to people's lives, knowing I have contributed to new cities, towns, hospitals, schools. And in times of disaster, people need power, which we help provide.

If you weren't working in the industry, what do you think you'd be doing instead?

I like fast paced, diverse environments that present lots of international and cultural opportunities. I would be doing a similar role in another industry with similar characteristics, where I would get a rich experience in the working day. I need a constant learning curve which I get at the moment due to the speed of innovation.

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

I would encourage upcoming leaders to get a mentor and sponsor. People need to understand the difference between a mentor and sponsor. Sponsors can really open doors and provide visibility to future roles and opportunities. Mentors develop specific parts of your skill set.

I had three formal mentors in Caterpillar. My first one was a product manager, who was allocated to me on the graduate scheme over the first six months. We laid a 10 year plan out and he took a lot of time to coach me and understand what I wanted from my career. Funnily enough I put that plan in a drawer and only found it again about five years ago where I realised I had actually followed the plan accurately without realising (e.g. 6 Sigma, commercial roles). I told my first mentor this who had been keeping tabs on my career...he said "it was a good plan...you've done what I thought you would do!"

Another manager took similar time to understand my goals and next steps, and ultimately became a sponsor for me. My sponsor has championed me and my career which has been invaluable.

I also have friends in other careers who have helped me e.g. in developing people leadership skills. I like to draw on their experiences and bounce ideas off them – going beyond your own environment is a great experience for me.

There are lots of people out there. Find these people who are genuinely interested in developing you with no personal/professional 'reward'. There is a lot of value to be had.

What woman / person inspires you and why?

I've met and continue to meet interesting and inspiring people. The characteristics I admire include having a clear, but bold goal, setting out to achieve these goals and overcoming barriers. They also enjoy the journey and are happy, motivated people.

Women leaders like Sheryl Sandberg, Oprah Winfrey, and Angela Merkel have a strong sense of themselves. They drive themselves forward and have intellect, tenacity and see obstacles as opportunities. They invest a lot in future female leaders but also work with men as allies.

What will be the biggest challenge for the next generation of women?

Unconscious bias and early gender stereotyping will be the biggest challenges. This really impacts the next generation of the workforce.

People are not aware of it most of the time and it will be difficult to overcome. With greater awareness, focus, attention, and constant dialogue between everyone, we can challenge ourselves and open up blind spots. We have an internal training course where we work with men to break down unconscious bias in order to help women move into more senior leadership roles. We also have presentations from inspiring female leaders which encourages great, open dialogue with men and gives practical advice on how to be in an inclusive environment. We do these things because we need to make change happen. The more regularly these activities happen, the greater the level of awareness and engagement from both men and women. I think this is really starting to gain momentum and is key to successful industries.

In the future however, there will be more roles for women in leadership and capabilities will be viewed differently. Although there will be more opportunities, we still need to intensely focus on tackling both unconscious bias and gender stereotyping.