



Learning from experience

An interview with Sue Robinson

Following a degree in Sociology and a PhD in Social Science and Criminology from Birmingham University Sue started a career in magazine journalism moving into PR & Communications for the building services industry.

She joined the RMI as Press Officer, moving on to Public Relations and Policy Manager, and then Director of External Affairs – gradually growing the press and policy unit at the RMI. In 2006, she was appointed Director of the NFDA, responsible for all UK franchised car and commercial vehicle retailers.

In this interview, Sue told us about her life in the automotive industry, her role in the Women at the Wheel initiative and the issues she sees as most important in future.

The challenge of automotive industry...

When asked about her career in the automotive industry and why she choose the sector she said it was more about the job than the actual industry at the beginning. She went from working in building services to the automotive sector – two industries with very low numbers of female employees. It was the skills she had that led her to the role but she revealed that, quite quickly, she realised that although the industry was challenging and exciting, it offered her long term career she could become established in.

Indeed, the challenge that the sector offers is also her favourite part of her work “no two days are the same, particularly, working with Government and regulators”. She states that there are great people in the automotive industry which make it a very seductive industry to work in.

Using ‘Women at the Wheel’ to provide opportunities

Sue believes that the initiative is an ideal opportunity to share positive messages about our industry and its relationship with women as well as to highlight the number of opportunities it offers. She explains that these opportunities exist across all areas of the industry – from manufacturing to retailing: “Currently we are working on a new project in the retailing side of the industry ‘Get My First Job’ – to encourage young people to join the motor retailing sector where there is a vast array of professional careers to choose from, all with real long term opportunities”.

Ours is a constantly changing industry and now, as usual, we are going through a challenging, as well as exciting, period of change.

Supporting women in the auto industry

Sue describes how much more can be done to support and enhance the career of women in the industry: “Careers advisors in schools are not doing enough to make young women aware of the automotive industry as potential career avenue. On the other hand, our industry needs to ensure that it is attractive to young women. It needs to promote itself more at schools and universities outlining the broad range of roles available. Other big retailers such as M&S, Tesco and John Lewis do it.”

We asked Sue what she thought the most important leadership skills are. She said these include: integrity, commitment, listening skills and that it is also important to encouraging others. And these are not just important for the women, she explained that they are important across the board for both male and females “because engagement with staff and colleagues is fundamental to a good team”. She believes that women in leadership have different characteristics compared with men in similar



positions but that the next generation of female employees are well positioned to develop the necessary skills to succeed.

When questioned about how to overcome barrier to female leadership Sue said “it is crucial that they have a good support system behind them”.

She pointed to social media as one of the biggest challenges for the generation of women behind her – “it has changed the expectations of young people a lot”. However, she recognised that although this is a challenge, there have always been challenges, many of which are the same as when she joined the industry.

In terms of working mothers in the industry, Sue says that “workplace innovations and policies to support women with young children as well as networks to help women navigate their careers and sponsorship programmes have helped in breaking down structural barriers. The main issue now is to continue to break down ‘invisible barriers’ and mind-sets in companies which many not even be acknowledged.”

Advice for women looking to build their career in Automotive

The window of opportunity only opens occasionally, it is your responsibility to jump through when it opens. Believe in yourself, work hard and enjoy it!

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