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Learning from experience

An interview with Julie Jenner by Sarah Tooze
(Fleet News)

Introduction

Julie Jenner has been a pioneer in the UK company car market. She was the first female chair of industry association ACFO and served for seven years (2006-2013). Yet her automotive career came about by chance when she was 'handed' responsibility for 60 cars while working as a secretary 27 years ago. She is now international business manager at vehicle leasing provider Arval (owned by BNP Paribas), with responsibility for a portfolio of clients across Europe who have EMEA fleet policies.



When you first entered the automotive industry 27 years ago could you have imagined going on to do your current role?

No, that's the funny thing. When I first started fleet it was by accident. I was working as a secretary in the personnel department at Homepride at the time. The personnel director I was working for had responsibility for fleet. One day they said, 'this is going to be part of your job as well'. I was like 'really? I'm not that interested in cars' but it just grows on you and I do believe to this day that fleet is like Marmite – you either love it or hate it and people who go into fleet either get out very quickly or they stay in it for years and years.

What helped you to get ahead in your career?

When I first started I had a brilliant mentor. He looked after the global fleet for the company and was very experienced and I just used to ask him questions all the time. He was a member of ACFO and he said, 'go and join'. So I went to an East Anglia meeting and I was so impressed by what I saw I bought into it more and became secretary of the East Anglia region, then became a regional chairman. I joined the board in 2003 and then I became national chairman in 2006, which is one of my proudest moments. To have become the first female chairman of ACFO is an accolade that no one can ever take away and it's something I think has been a real game changer for women in the fleet industry.

Was it difficult to become the first female chairman?

I think it was more difficult [to be a female in the company car market] 20 to 25 years ago. You would go to an event and it would just be a sea of dark suits – all men – and you would see an occasional flash of colour where a woman was there wearing something slightly different whereas now there are so many more women.

I do believe I had to work harder for credibility because cars, not necessarily fleet but just cars in general, tend to be a male dominated environment. I had to make sure that everything I was saying was accurate so that nobody could say, 'typical girl, she doesn't know what she's talking about'.

You managed Nokia's fleet (900 cars at its peak) for 10 years until 2004, what did you learn during that period?

When I first joined Nokia I didn't prepare for the different levels of people you would be dealing with. You could be dealing with a driver then you're dealing with a board director where you're presenting a case for making a significant change. I did some internal development courses around negotiation so that's an important skill to try to develop.

One real turning point for me was when my line manager at the time, HR director Trisha Robinson, said to me, 'when you're in a meeting you're keen and excitable but sometimes it is better, rather than trying to speak all the time, to sit back, let everybody else say their piece, jot your notes down for the comments they are making, and then when it's quiet step in and make your points'. I get more out of listening to clients and then working on what I've heard rather than being so excitable and wanting to get my point across right from the start.

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After Nokia you moved to the supplier side, working for vehicle leasing companies, was that a challenge?

It was a challenge initially but also an opportunity. I had to learn to see things from the other side of the fence. But because I'd been a fleet manager, I had sat where the customer was sitting, I could try to tailor my approach to how I felt when I was a customer and I still carry that with me today. The challenge in my current European role has been getting wider knowledge. Understanding how company car taxation works in different countries has been a real eye-opener.

What does your current role involve?

Arval operates in 29 countries so as international business manager I am responsible for a portfolio of clients across Europe that have EMEA fleet policies. Not all clients have company cars in 29 countries but they might have say 10 countries and my role is to co-ordinate those activities and to work with clients on their fleet strategy so what are their objectives for their fleet this year? Which vehicles are due to be changed and what alternative fuel vehicles can they offer? It's those sort of strategic objectives that will help them to keep running an efficient fleet. Typically, my customers are not based in the UK so I travel all over Europe. I get to see some very nice places – and a lot of airports!

What's in store for the future?

Whichever section of the automotive industry you're in, whether you're an OEM, a dealer, a fleet buyer or a fleet provider there are so many challenges with Brexit, with WLTP (Worldwide harmonised Light vehicles Test Procedure), with powertrains, with driverless cars. We've all got to address these challenges, just potentially in a slightly different way. It's great to be part of an industry that is moving so quickly and gives you the opportunity to talk about so many technologies that 20 years ago just weren't on the table.

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