



If You Can, I Can

Promoting diversity is a hard task without the right mix of candidates.

Jane Simpson, Chief Engineer at Network Rail, talks to **Mary-Anne Baldwin** about how the company is addressing its shortage of women in the workplace

Jane Simpson starts her work days like many of us, on a train by 7:30am, laptop out and “going somewhere in the country”. Where her story differs is that the train, and its tracks, are her work. As Chief Engineer at Network Rail, Jane’s responsible for the safe and efficient running of the company’s services, and she’s the first woman to do it.

We meet at Network Rail’s offices in Euston where the staff mix is healthily

diverse. In fact, I see more women as I journey up a few floors to meet her than I do men. It’s not the same throughout the company.

“Currently our population of females is 14 per cent and for those with technical skills it’s a great deal smaller than that,” Jane explains.

It’s a big issue in the ‘STEM’ sectors of science, engineering, technology and

maths. While companies want diversity, there just isn’t a mix of candidates applying.

“There were no ladies toilets when I started – we ended up making cleaning cupboards into ladies’ loos,” she tells me. “It feels like we’re the generation that’s constantly trying to break through every barrier.”

Jane joined British Rail as a graduate entrant in 1996, the year of its >



In 2014, Network Rail updated its graduate recruitment campaign to promote diversity and reflect the role engineers have in society.

privatisation, but her first “real” job wasn’t until 1998 when she became Network Rail’s Overhead Line Engineer.

“It was a transition for the guys on the frontline. They’d never had a female engineer before,” she explains.

“It took quite a while for people to work out how to behave in front of me. Should they swear, shouldn’t they?”

She offers another story from when she started out. It was at a time when some work environments were notably less PC: “One depot was floor to ceiling in page three cut-outs. I would make people talk to me in front of them because that would make them embarrassed. Within a couple of weeks it was all gone.”

Unwilling to adopt masculine behaviour as she’d seen other female leaders do, Jane wanted to send the message that, “Actually, I behave differently.” Female leaders offer an alternative style, says Jane. “And that’s why there should be more women in senior roles.

“We were in an era that was command and control. I’m a very collaborative worker, so for me it was a case of: ‘How

According to WISE, a campaign that promotes women in science, technology and engineering, which works closely with Network Rail, women make up only 12.8 per cent of the UK STEM workforce.

However, in 2014 that had risen by 8.2 per cent compared to 2012.

do I get these guys to understand that they need to communicate the problems, be collaborative, and then actually, I will work with them?”

“The challenge was exciting. It certainly gave me self-resilience, a lot of self-awareness, and made me unique, which

was actually a good thing because it brought that first ever level of diversity.”

Jane clearly loves her job. She resonates a similar kind of pride when talking about her 12- and 13-year-old children as she does when explaining how she modernised Network Rail’s graduate recruitment campaign.

In 2014, Network Rail went from using a generic image of a male engineer in orange, with the very masculine tagline: ‘Think big, think bold, think brave’, to a design featuring images of a spacesuit, dress and festival.

The new tagline was: ‘From NASA to retail and back, we connect people.’ It reflects Network Rail’s use of NASA technology, which enables people to travel to work, shops and festivals. It’s about creating a story, showing people an engineer’s role in connecting the country.

It led to an 84 per cent increase in graduate applicants, “a massive increase” >



in black and ethnic minority applicants and 180 more female candidates.

“Women like to be creative, they like to be challenged but some words really switch them off. I think you should explain to people that engineering is about creating things, that’s what science is about,” she enthuses.

“It’s tapping into that natural desire to want to understand how something works and to make it.”

QUICK FIRE QUESTIONS:

Q: As a role model, what would you say to aspiring female leaders?

A: Take yourself out of your comfort zone, once you’re there it’s really hard to move on. Constantly look for that challenge.

Q: What are you most proud of?

A: Besides my two children, I’m most proud of creating an organisation within Network Rail, which delivers overhead line renewals.

Within six months, I moved over 120 existing staff members and recruited 40 more. We got efficiencies from it but we also got massive capabilities. Ten years on, it’s still flourishing.

Q: What’s left on your career tick-list?

A: I’d like to be a non-executive director within the next 10 years.

I’m not yet ready to settle into that slower-paced role but I am a trustee of the Scouts Association, which is helping me to prepare for it.

This creativity and analysis has been fundamental to all roles throughout Jane’s career.

Clear Vision

In 2011 Jane was appointed as the Engineering Director for London North Western Route, responsible for over 200 engineers, 550 stations and 4,500 miles of railway infrastructure on Europe’s busiest ‘rail corridor’ – the West Coast Main Line.

Today, as Chief Engineer, Jane directs over 450 engineers, is responsible for engineering policies and competence, and for technical strategy and safety. It’s something that, as a child, she would never have expected.

“When I was growing up in Coventry during the 70s and 80s you were expected either to work in the car manufacturing plant or the big gold tower in the centre of town, the Axa Tower, which meant you worked in finance.

“I had no idea what engineering was but I knew what I liked. I liked Lego as a kid and jigsaws, I liked creating things... At school I liked physics and maths, but it was my dad who said I should do an apprenticeship.”

From there Jane was sponsored to do an electronics degree at Coventry University before rolling through a list of courses and into a graduate scheme.

Despite seeming hardwired for it, Jane might not have been an engineer had her father not pushed her in that direction. It’s why she recognises the importance of promoting not only her company, but her entire sector, to those who can influence potential engineers at a young age.

“You have to reach out to parents because many don’t understand what engineering is,” she says. There’s a lot of untapped potential in women who don’t know engineering is an option and Jane knows a clever marketing campaign can make all the difference.

It wasn’t long ago that women had the same limited vision for all top-level jobs. “One of my friends, when she was only 19 or 20, said: ‘I want to be a director of a company by the time I’m 40.’ I was gobsmacked at that because I had no idea that women could be directors.

“But I thought: ‘Yeah, I do too. If you can, I can.’” ■



Jane Simpson
Chief Engineer
Network Rail

Jane joined Network Rail in 1996 and was appointed to her current role of Chief Engineer in January 2015.

She sits on the Network Rail Group Investment Panel; Network Rail’s Strategic Leadership Group; chairs the Industry Standards Co-ordination Committee and is a member of the Industry Technology Strategic Leadership Group.

As Chief Engineer, Jane is accountable for the company’s engineering policies, technical strategy, engineering competence and safety. She is also responsible for colleagues, partner-contractors and the travelling public.

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