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09.05.17

60 seconds with... Adeline Ginn, founder of Women in Rail

We catch up with Adeline Ginn, founder of Women in Rail (WR), about the rail industry's outlook and the importance of investing in people.

What are the biggest challenges facing the rail industry in the next 12 months?

Over the last two decades, the rail industry has been one of the country's major success stories. The number of passengers travelling by train has increased to its highest level since the First World War: 1.7 billion journeys are taken by rail every year. Rail use is forecast to continue to grow by 17-21% by 2020 and the government is investing billions of pounds in the infrastructure. In fact, some of the largest projects ever seen in the UK are within rail.

The industry is currently undergoing an extensive recruitment drive to either replace people retiring or to deliver on new projects. Thousands of jobs are being created and thousands of new homes are being built which will enable parts of England such as Birmingham and the north to be regenerated.

The UK railway is a true success story, one of the most exciting and dynamic industries in the UK, and with such success comes greater challenges. The industry is under huge pressure to improve its performance whilst at the same time successfully deliver major projects. To do that, it needs to attract and retain the best talent available – and that includes women.

More than 30,000 apprenticeship places will be created across the road and rail industry over the next five years, and it's purely logical that we recruit the best people for those roles, men and women. This isn't a "tick-box" exercise to meet a quota, it's about doing what's best commercially to ensure the industry is able to meet the demands placed on it.

How is WR supporting the sector in these tough times, especially with regards to the skills gap challenge?

We're a key champion of the Rail Sector Skills Delivery Plan (RSSDP), which set out the key steps to attract a new generation of people to work in rail whilst also investing in its existing workforce. As such, our focus is on two key areas: how we can help nurture and develop the careers of women who are already working in the rail sector, and how we can attract more women to work in this industry.

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To answer the first challenge, we run a wide range of workshops on a range of topics such as building confidence or developing networking skills. Our aim is to empower women, give them the tools, support and ability to thrive. We also host a series of networking events where both men and women can meet others in the industry to learn from each other and provide advice, support and, in some cases, inspiration!

We also run an extremely successful mentor programme, where women can receive guidance and support from someone outside their immediate peer group. This has proved to be immensely popular, so much so it was oversubscribed this year.

At the same time, we work to encourage employers to identify and foster their female workforce, whether through their own HR programmes or through our work.

For those outside the industry, we try and showcase how rail is one of the most exciting and dynamic sectors in the UK, with a wide range of career opportunities. People often see rail as a male-dominated industry that's stuck in the dark ages, which just isn't true. Whilst it does have more men than women, the industry is not anti-women. Instead, it faces competition from other sectors that are perceived to be more female-friendly and often people just aren't aware of the wide range of opportunities available.

To combat this, we have a regular column in Huffington Post discussing particular themes and issues. In 2016, we released the '20 Most Inspirational Women in Rail' report that gained a lot of coverage. This year, we have searched for the 20 rising stars of rail to showcase female talent in their early careers. We also have developed a strong social media presence across Twitter and LinkedIn.

What changes will you be pressing the industry for in the long term?

They key will be to encouraging companies to take an active role in WR, whether by encouraging staff to join, providing time to host and run events, or financially support us now that we are a registered charity.

At the same time, and linked to the RSSDP, we will be encouraging all companies to identify and foster female talent with their organisation. Investing in staff makes commercial sense: it helps increase wellbeing and productivity whilst at the same time boosting retention rates, saving on recruitment costs and lost knowledge.

The industry also needs to collectively challenge negative stereotypes of working in rail, many of which are outdated and untrue. There are so many exciting roles and opportunities in the sector, whether in HR, engineering, law, marketing or driving – whatever your passion is, there is a job in rail. We need to do more to get that message across.

Now that we've discussed the challenges, what opportunities are there for the industry?

I truly believe that the industry can be a beacon for other business sectors in overcoming the challenges I've mentioned. We have the will, the opportunity and the structure to make a real difference.

Studies have shown that companies with more women on their boards outperform their rivals with a 42% higher return in sales, 66% higher return on invested capital and 53% higher return on equity. Therefore, if the rail sector is representative of its customer base, it will thrive.

The opportunities are there for companies through increased performance, for women to have challenging and fulfilling careers, and for WR to help make it happen.

What can rail companies start doing now to support inclusivity and diversity?

It's worth saying that many aren't starting from scratch – a lot of work has already been done. But rail companies can play a key role in supporting WR, helping us provide women with more mentors, run more training sessions and events and collaborating with other organisations. At the same time, as stated earlier, they can look inwards, fostering their own staff and providing opportunities and career paths that help us retain the best talent. A simple way to do this would be to prioritise training to leaders and senior managers on how to identify, develop and support its female workforce.

How do you expect Brexit and the general elections to impact the industry and its workforce going forward?

At present it's too early to say. We don't know what impact the general election will have to the make-up of the UK government, and consequently what effect that will have on negotiations with the EU.

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Location: Swindon,
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Benefits

Senior Test & Commissioning Engineer - (Signalling)

Location: East Riding
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Salary: £50000 -
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Benefits

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Location: London
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