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It's International Women's Day - Let's All Blaze a Trail of Our Own

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The 8th of March marks International Women's Day across the world. Launched for the first time in 1910, it has become a day where we reflect and celebrate the achievements of women across the economic, political and social spheres. At a glance, women have come far. Less than 100 years ago women were deprived of the vote in Britain, sharply contrasting with today's society where people like Angela Merkel and Hillary Clinton are household names in politics.

As the figure of women advances in society, so too do our education systems and opportunities in employment. The rail industry has transformed beyond recognition. Advancing in leaps and bounds, gone are the days of steam power, greasy overalls and an entirely male workforce. Today women are playing an increasingly important role and leading the way in every aspect of the industry, from apprentice engineer to head of fleet, customer service advisor to people director, depot manager to continuous improvement leader, planning analyst to finance business partner, to name a few.

However, Women in Rail's recent Industry Survey uncovered that just 16% of the workforce in rail is female, at a time when our sector is going through a period of exponential growth most industries would envy.

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So, in honour of International Women's Day, I want to remind everyone of some of the many fantastic women who contribute to make rail such a great sector to work in, and have been inspirational to the entire industry. To do so, I asked a few of rail's most influential women questions about the lessons they have learnt from their career and their advice to women hoping to enter the industry and move up the ladder.

I spoke with Anna Walker, former Chair at the Office of Rail Regulation, Wilma Allan, Chief Financial Officer at Govia Thameslink Railway, Karen Boswell, Managing Director of Hitachi Rail UK, Dyan Crowther, Chief Operating Officer at Govia Thameslink Railway and Maggie Simpson, Executive Director at Rail Freight Group.

The first thing I asked them was about the difficulties that they had faced in their day to day careers. Their answers were almost unanimous: overall their main obstacle has been overcoming their own lack of self-confidence and balancing their career with family life.

Dyan stated: "Sometimes people, men essentially, assume I'm the PA rather than the boss!" She remedies these prejudices by always assuming people don't know who she is: "Don't be afraid to make yourself stand out!" After all, as Karen states: "As a woman you live more under the microscope than a man," so you might as well be known!

So, as such successful women, what career advice would they give to anyone hoping to succeed? This is particularly crucial in an industry that sees just 0.6% of women in a senior role (Women in Rail, Industry Survey, 2015). Anna states: "Focus on what really matters to you, go for a job which enthuses you regardless of the title given to you." Maggie added "Sometimes you just have to do it and bugger the consequences. You have to believe everything will fall into place."

Finally, I wanted to know, as a woman at the top, what has been the most rewarding thing about their career? Their answers were exceptionally similar: all involved using their experience to help mentor others. Wilma nicely summed the shared sentiment, "The quiet knowledge that I helped someone succeed in realising their career potential, both for men and women, is what gives me real satisfaction."

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So, on this day as we celebrate 105 years of women's achievements, it is apparent that although we have come so far, there remains work to be done to achieve true equality in the rail industry and wider business.

Both have much to gain from this shift - studies have shown time and time again that companies with a more diverse workforce are more successful. The statistics speak for themselves here: 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.

International Women's Day presents the opportunity to celebrate female trail blazers, women who have climbed the career ladder and are now actively extending the rungs down to the rest of us and also those who are working with us and supporting us in doing so. So if you find yourself at a career crossroads, perhaps take a moment to ponder their advice and ask yourself, what is truly important to you in your next career step and how might you blaze a trail of your own?

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