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Tjitske van Hellemond

LEADING WOMEN

Manufacturers, distributors and rental companies in the construction equipment market have long been male dominated businesses. That has been slowly changing over the past decade, but the pace of change is now beginning to gather real momentum - at least in the European aerial lift business where there are already a good number of strong, talented women excelling in key positions. Leigh Sparrow interviews Tjitske van Hellemond - managing director of JLG's commercial operations for Europe, Africa, the Middle East and India - one of many women moving into senior positions in the access industry.

In 1982, when I was appointed as district manager for a crane manufacturer, most of the women working in the business were secretaries or accounting clerks. I do recall however, several astute, capable, and highly talented 'Personal Assistants' working for senior executives, who wielded enormous soft power but were still regarded as glorified typists or dogsbodies, even though they were often more capable than the men they served.

At the time, one of my territories was the Netherlands - one of the most male dominated markets I looked after - but my direct competitor was a woman - Jeanine Jappes or Jeanine De Cock as she was later known. She was possibly the only female salesperson in the industry at that time - and I am not sure it has changed that much since then? She was a true trailblazer. I had been thrust into the job at a young age with little experience of the role and soon discovered that while I had the better products, better range, better brand name and worked for a more dynamic company, I soon learned that I was completely outclassed by Jeanine. I also realised



Jeanine Jappes/De Cock over sees the signing the appointment of HDW as Coles dealer

from causal conversations with customers and dealer staff that any woman in such a role had to be twice as good as any male - and Jeanine most certainly was.

Jeanine still attends the occasional trade show, despite having retired on several occasions. Since retiring the first time around, she worked with GGR - the European master distributor for Unic cranes - helping set up its distribution network. At GGR, she worked for Gill Riley, a tough no-nonsense boss with zero ability to 'suffer fools



Jeanine signing a new Norwegian dealer for GGR Unic in 2012 with Thor Nordahl of Knutsen Maskin and Tomoyuki Ikari of Unic

gladly'. Jeanine was called out of retirement on several occasions after a male replacement failed to make the grade.

A REGULAR FEATURE

The situation regarding women in senior management positions has changed for the better, but old prejudices remain, in some countries more than others. This is the first in what we hope will become a series of interviews with leading women in lifting related industries.

Tjitske van Hellemond

TJITSKE VAN HELLEMOND

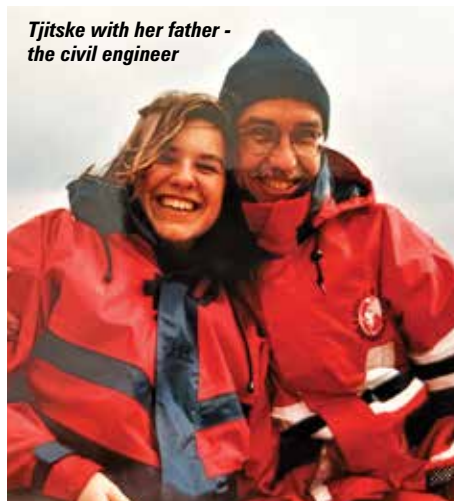
To begin, we spoke with an individual who, while she has been in the access industry for six years, is not particularly well known and is almost certainly underestimated. Many people were surprised when earlier this year Tjitske van Hellemond was appointed as managing director of JLG's commercial operations in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and the Indian sub-continent, with responsibility for all sales, customer service and after sales activity.

The move followed a restructuring that brought all the company's businesses and products under one umbrella, including those manufactured in Tonneins, France, and at Power Towers in the UK. It also includes direct sales subsidiaries in four European countries.

Before her promotion, van Hellemond was responsible for regional marketing, more recently adding customer care to her role. We wanted to find out how this seemingly mild-mannered individual was catapulted from a low profile marketing executive to such a wide ranging senior position.

Born and bred in the Netherlands, van Hellemond made the unusual decision to study to be a civil engineer. Why did she choose such a male-dominated career?

"My father was a civil engineer and while he never encouraged me to follow in his footsteps - in fact, he positively tried to talk me out of it - when I was growing up, he would regularly pull over to the side of the road to look at a bridge or other impressive structure, it was hard not to soak up his enthusiasm for his work and what he helped create. I also loved mathematics and physics, subjects which are well suited to such a career."



"When I decided I wanted to be a civil engineer, my father tried to dissuade me knowing full well that this was no career for a girl, even the degree course would be male dominated and not particularly welcoming to female students. That simply made me even more determined. So, when I went for the university interview, to learn more about the course and meet the other applicants, I took my mother rather than my father. When my mother and I left the building we had exactly the same impression, while things might have moved on a little since my dad was studying, it was not by that much. I thought to myself - I can and will do this."

CHANGES OF DIRECTION

"By the time I started the course there were just ten other girls in my year. I thoroughly enjoyed it and did well, although, as I progressed, I began to realise that I did not really want to spend my life as a technical engineer. So, when finance and insurance consulting company Accenture

offered me a job as a financial service consultant following one of those career fairs, I accepted and spent a wonderful four years in an incredibly intensive environment working, eating dinner and socialising with my colleagues around the clock. There was very little life outside of the job, it was all work. Although it was incredibly intense it was also a lot of fun, but it is very much a life for young people starting their careers."

"While banking and finance has a reputation for being an extremely male oriented industry, I found that it was much more open than that, just so long as you are able to handle an intense work-related lifestyle. However, it began to dawn on me that I would like to work in a more tangible industry - banking is a numbers business and not at all product related."

THE PON YEARS

"In 2008 I landed an interview with Caterpillar dealer Pon, (which was to acquire access rental company Gunco, Crane rental company Milcon and Crane and access distributor HDW - Jeanine's old dealer - but that is another story) as soon as I pulled into the yard for my first interview, the sight of all the big Cat equipment immediately captured by imagination and I thought there and then 'this is for me, yes!' It was an exciting time at Pon in that it owned Cat dealers in four countries and I was involved in all aspects of the business as assistant to a senior manager - not just in title, but in reality, helped by my engineering background. Although I was a civil engineer and not particularly familiar with equipment, the fact that I was an engineer and had a technical ability really helped."

FACING POTENTIAL OBSTACLES

"In 2013 Pon acquired the Trimble distributor Sitech, and I was appointed as its general



With Pon on a Cat trip to Malaga test ground in 2011 - the only woman in sight

manager. The previous owner had agreed to stay with the business for an extended transition period, so I got to work with him, listening and learning. My brief was to integrate the business into the Pon group over time, without destroying it. Although this period of my life lasted less than three years it taught me a great deal. I had several significant obstacles to overcome, firstly I was seen as an agent and a spy - the eyes and ears of head office. Secondly I was young for the job and a woman in a company of more than 20 employees, of which only two were female - a secretary and the owner's wife who looked after the finances. But thirdly, and perhaps even more of a challenge was the fact that I was a northerner going into a very southern Dutch company. My name and even the way I spoke were even more northern than the North."

DON'T TRY AND SHOW WHO'S THE BOSS

"My approach was to completely avoid anything that might suggest I was showing that I was the boss, preferring to take a much humbler

approach, to listen and learn and understand how people related with each other and what made them tick. It has never been in my nature to be the first to shout out. I also made sure to take time to win the trust of the former owners wife, not only because she was in charge of finance, but also because it became clear that there was much I could learn from her as I came to know and understand the business. She was very good, almost like the 'mother of the company' and she helped me a great deal. The next two years or so were really good ones, and we managed to integrate the business without spoiling it and at the same time expand."

So how come you did not stay with the business longer? Especially given that telematics were the up and coming thing at the time?

"Well, the location was the big thing, as family began to play a more important role in my life. We lived near Almere, so the job at Sitech involved long commutes and I had not long given birth. So, I began looking to relocate to a Pon division closer to home, if and when an opportunity appeared."

A WOMAN WITH A NEW BABY WILL NOT BE INTERESTED

"By chance at that time a fantastic job did come up, but it seems that I was discounted at an early stage of the selection process. It turned out that those responsible for making the selection had assumed that having a new baby I would not be interested. Thankfully one of the women on the selection panel contacted me and said that she thought it should be me who decided if I was interested in the job or not, rather than the members of the panel. I said 'yes!' I did want to go for it. And I made it through to the final stage and was ultimately chosen to run the Pon parts and service operations."

That is a massive job at a national Caterpillar dealership, and a critical part of the business and yet you had little, if any, experience of running even a small parts or service operation?

"True, but I had a technical background, and by now I had a good cross section of experience and had even managed an entire business within the

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ANOTHER CHANGE

It sounds like a wonderful opportunity and experience and sounds as if you were being 'fast tracked' for even more senior roles. And yet you did not stay with Pon that long what happened?

"Yes it is true I was in the job for little more than a year. What happened was that an ex colleague, a person I trusted and respected enormously, approached me about a job at JLG. I knew nothing about the access industry, but he insisted that the opportunity was one I should go for. When I hesitated, he pushed me to at least go along for an initial interview - with no commitment."

"Eventually I thought, 'well what do I have to lose', it would involve learning new skills and going into marketing, an area of which I knew little and I have always tended to be attracted by the unknown and moving outside of my comfort zone. So, I went along and met Karel (Karel van Huijser - regional vice president). When I told him that I had no direct experience of marketing - he said: "We have people here who know that - I am looking for someone who can help over a much wider area."

"I liked the look of the access industry, and I would be working for a manufacturer, an OEM. So, I began to warm to the idea, but it took months, as I was not at all keen to leave Pon. What finally swung it, perhaps was when he said: 'Look go to JLG headquarters in the USA to meet everyone over there, take your husband and stay the weekend.' So off we went to Hagerstown, Maryland. I had eight interviews in a single day and liked what I heard and saw. Then we went and stayed in Washington for the weekend, enjoying a rare opportunity to have time for just the two of us, and were able to think about our lives and where our careers were going etc. We loved Washington and decided that weekend that I would give it a go and say Yes."

"So, I joined JLG in mid 2017 as the regional director of marketing. It was an exciting time as JLG had recently acquired Power Towers and there much was going on."

CHOOSING BETWEEN A MAN AND LESS EXPERIENCED WOMAN?

So, tell me, when you are looking to fill a new role, especially senior ones, and you are confronted with a very experienced male candidate and perhaps a less experienced female - how do you handle it?

"I try to look beyond the apparent experience and look at the person and what they might be able to achieve. But a much bigger problem is persuading enough women to apply for such jobs. I find that typically when a woman reads a job advertisement, which lists 10 required skills or criteria, and she only fully meets eight of them she will take the view that she is not qualified. A man doing exactly the same and meeting only five of criteria will think the job was made for him. It is hard to know how to overcome that."

In summary, Tjitske van Hellemond's career, not to mention Jeanine Jappes', shows how it has always been possible to make the grade as a woman in a male dominated industry, BUT - it does involve everything working out, a company that is open minded to some extent or other, often being in the right place at the right time, and having some luck and good fortune on your side. All that plus it has typically involved being better and working harder, which will eventually win the respect of even the most hard-boiled dinosaur. Van Hellemond also mentioned the benefit of mentors several times, and this is true for everyone - male or female. I do think that we are getting closer to a truly level employment playing field, and that now the major challenge is encouraging enough female candidates to apply for jobs in our industry. Business will be all the better for it. ■



During Pon operator training

group, where I learnt how to manage everything from cash flow and finance to sales, marketing and dealing with an OEM."

STARTING AT THE BOTTOM

"But you are right, and I saw that as a serious issue, so for the first few weeks on the job I insisted that I worked on the shop floor learning what everyone did - as a co-worker not simply as an observer. As you might imagine, they took the opportunity to give me all the nasty jobs, such as washing down the dirtiest machines coming into the yard for repair. And they played all of the usual new trainee tricks on me, such as cranking up the pressure washer to maximum so that the first time I pulled the trigger the recoil almost blew me across the yard. In spite of such trickery, I really enjoyed it and surprised some of them because I did not care how dirty I got, or how hard the work was physically. I also made a point of taking my coffee and lunch breaks with them, just as I would have done if I had been my permanent job. It would have been so easy to head upstairs for my lunch, but I learnt so much and the time spent there has proved invaluable on so many levels."

"In this new job I got to work closer than ever with Caterpillar which had a regional office in the building, I also had overall responsibility for parts and service operations in the other three countries that Pon covered, which not only gave me an international perspective, but allowed me to compare the different work practices between the companies, with the aim to adopt the most successful strategies. The use of Telematics data in aftersales service was also coming on stream, which was perfect timing, given my Sitech experience, as we looked at ways of using all that data in the most effective way possible to improve our business. It was especially interesting to learn how our operations in Sweden and Norway overcame the incredible geographic challenges, especially with the bigger equipment, travelling incredible distances on roads that are not so great."



The JLG delegation to the IPAF Summit 2023