

Prological's Kelly Borskjaer (L) and Michelle Powell (R).



THINKING ABOUT WOMEN IN SUPPLY CHAIN

The importance of attracting and keeping female talent in supply chain has been an increasingly hot topic over recent years. Prological's Michelle Powell and Kelly Borskjaer discuss their experience in the industry, what needs improving, and what is already being done well.

Much has been made of the importance of getting more women into supply chain. However, how this is best done – and the importance of taking active steps to achieve a more even male-to-female ratio in the industry – is still a matter up for debate.

Prological's Michelle Powell, Senior Analyst, and Kelly Borskjaer, Bid and Brand Manager, are two leaders in their field who spoke to *MHD* to share their perspectives on this vital issue: how the industry has developed, and what work still needs to be done.

Michelle, who has worked in the industry for almost two decades, says there has been a big shift in the composition of the work force.

"I studied science and engineering at university and was used to being almost exclusively with boys early on," Michelle says. "But to be honest, it wasn't something I thought too much of. I'm fortunate in that I had

great experiences during my entire career primarily due to supportive direct line managers."

Michelle spent almost 16 years at Kimberly-Clark, which she credits with having a "progressive culture".

"During my tenure there definitely was a shift towards more women in the industry," she notes. "When I started out, I might have been the only woman in a room full of ten people. But 16 years later there were many more women employed with engineering or science degrees, particularly in the technical and quality assurance or planning areas where I worked. So, there was a big shift in terms of the composition of the workforce."

What accounts for this change, in Michelle's view?

"I think the change stems from having visibility of the opportunities available from an early age," she says. "I went to a girls' school, finishing in

1990. One thing I remember is really wanting to study engineering drawing – and not having the opportunity to do that."

But Michelle says this is the only real hurdle she can recall in her career.

"Once I got to university, and then into the workforce, it just completely changed. I didn't feel restricted. I didn't feel any negativity or that I was limited in any way because I was a female.

"My impression is that school has definitely changed, girls are encouraged more to do whatever they want at an early age – and especially STEM subjects. It's all over the media, and government is pushing for more young women to pursue careers in STEM. The opportunities that are open for women is so much more visible now than it was in the past, which is great."

Kelly Borskjaer is relatively new to supply chain, having joined Prological

in March of this year to work on bidding and proposals processes, after working 20 years in the engineering and consulting sectors.

“Coming from the engineering services field, I would say that sector is still very male-dominated,” Kelly says. “But my impression is that a large part of that has to do with where one starts one’s career progression – up until recently, young women haven’t been encouraged in pursuing a career as, say, a technician, which is where you start before becoming a service manager, then a general manager. I’ve only been in supply chain a short time, and my general impression is that it’s quite similar. But like Michelle, this doesn’t strike me as unusual. The difference is that these days there’s more of an active push and visibility around women being in the sector as a viable career path from an early age.

“But speaking from my own experience across the engineering and consulting fields, and now in supply chain, I’ve never felt there has been a barrier to my progress.”

Michelle notes that part of reason she has never felt hamstrung in the industry is because her experience at Kimberly-Clark was very positive on a cultural level.

“The policies they had around maternity leave and pay were always good,” she says. “Pay was based on job description. I do remember, after returning from 12 months of maternity leave, my pay had fallen below the midline. But fortunately, my boss went right in to bat for me and the issue was rectified. So, company culture is really important, and so long as an awareness of and emphasis on having a female-friendly culture is front-of-mind, that’s the main thing.”

Michelle adds that at the end of the day, it should just be a true meritocracy.

“Firstly, you’ve got to have women who want to do the job. That’s where the issue starts. Now, it might be a case of women not being sufficiently aware or feeling enabled to do these jobs – in which case I’m all for opening those avenues. But we must also realise that women, and increasingly men, may have different priorities at different times of their lives – structural change is important in supporting that family-life balance that we all are looking for, but time out of the workforce can definitely impact on career trajectory.”

Kelly agrees with this assessment, saying that awareness of the sector and an inclusive culture will be the primary determinants in getting *those women who*

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want to be working in the field working in the field.

“These sorts of questions can’t ever be boiled down to just one single factor,” Kelly says. “No doubt, there are still some people out there who think only people who look like them can do the same job – but they’re becoming less and less common in my view.

“But we should also be aware that supply chain and related industries will need to work hard to improve their attractiveness to women. For instance, there are industries which are simply more female dominated, and so in terms of competition for talent – supply chain might out-compete for attracting male talent, and other industries out-compete for attracting female talent.

“For example, I had a young woman working for me in the last engineering firm I was at. She was great, she loved the work – but,” Kelly laughs, “she was tapped on the shoulder by Louis Vuitton to come work for them. Between maybe a free air conditioner and a free handbag ... what’s a girl to do?”

C-SUITE CONDITIONS

Kelly notes that at the board level across all sectors, including supply chain, there is a push to get more women in at the top.

“Given previous generational dynamics, I think it is important that mentoring processes are in place to ensure women who want to take that step up to the C-Suite roles can build the experience necessary for these roles.”

“I agree,” Michelle says. “Setting quotas on a process that’s quite multifactorial can create unnecessary angst in the workplace. No one who has earned their position on merit wants to feel undermined by any perception that they were promoted for non-meritocratic reasons.

“As Kelly says, when it comes to shifting the ratio more towards women in the industry, measures should be squarely focused on promoting the attractiveness of the industry and opening up pathways for their meritocratic advancement. That’s where companies in supply chain should be putting their focus.” ■