

National Women in Engineering Day, 23rd June 2015

Full response from Philippa Oldham CEng MIMechE, Head of transport and manufacturing, Institution of Mechanical Engineers (IMechE)

As far back as I can remember I would take things apart, trying to figure out how they worked. I was lucky, my parents were familiar with what an engineer was, as both my paternal and maternal grandfathers had been engineers. My mum has a passion for motorsport, so growing up I developed a passion for Formula 1. At 15yrs I gained my first experience of work in a garage. This provided hands on experience from changing spark plugs to understanding suspension systems. Growing up on the Leicestershire / Northamptonshire boarder I was located near to motorsport valley. After my GCSEs I wrote to Formula 1 teams and was lucky enough to be offered a summer role at Ilmor Engineering Ltd.

This was how I started my career, and my advice if you want to become an engineer is to get hands on experience in a sector or industry that excites you. There is no point going to work in an F1 factory if you are not interested in F1 or cars! Ask to move around the business, shadowing designers, production engineers, safety and testing engineers; this will give you an overview of how an engineering company works. Engineering is great career choice as it gives you the ability to make a difference to the society within which we live. I believe that the UK has only a small percentage (5.5%) of female engineers due to the lack of understanding as to what this profession can offer. It is a career that can take you in a multitude of directions from helping to reduce our impact on the climate, to developing the next high speed train, to producing the special effects on the next Bond movie or designing a children's playground using sustainable materials.

More often than not women tend to have career plans. The lack of visibility of professional women at all levels is a challenge for engineering companies. Last year I had my first child, a little girl, Allegra. I was a female engineer who had driven to do her best, working to get both recognition and respect for her ability within the field. This was something that I had wanted to achieve before thinking about starting a family. I felt humbled by the amount of young female engineers, embarking on their careers, who wanted to hear my story and ask questions and advice. I had never had this opportunity so I was happy to oblige. Engineering companies need to become more proactive about engaging with their employees who are parents. They should recognise the importance of their employees having the right work life balance. Yes, it is a hard challenge but engineers solve complex problems every day. Evidence suggests that this would not only give you a happier workforce but one that is more diverse and productive. If you want to become an engineer or are currently working within the sector make sure your job not only interests you but excites you. Move role when you start to stagnate, challenge your peers (and yourself) with their thinking but most importantly do what is right for you.