

Breaking barriers

Dr Ladan Iravanian runs two of Tata Chemicals Europe's core businesses which have a combined turnover of £70 million. As General Manager of the salt & sodium bicarbonate business, she handles three major production facilities with a core team of 175 people. Dr Iravanian, who has held business development and leadership roles at Tata Chemicals Europe for several years, explains why the chemicals sector offers good career choices to women

You have a PhD in nuclear engineering. What drew you to the chemicals industry?

When I completed my PhD in the late 1980s, the nuclear industry was not as vibrant as it is today. I joined the graduate programme at ICI which, at the time, provided a good foundation in the industry.

Can you tell us about some of the milestones in your career inside and outside Tata Chemicals (TCL)?

The early part of my career was focused on engineering and plant management. I became the Operations Manager for the Winnington site, which was TCL's largest manufacturing site in the UK.

I then moved into business development, with a focus on growing our sodium bicarbonate business. I was heavily involved in the acquisition of British Salt in 2010. More recently, I focused on strategy development and business restructuring in the UK, and the global chemicals business, before becoming the General Manager for our salt and sodium bicarbonate business.

BLURB: I think the industry provides a very challenging, varied and interesting career opportunity for anyone with drive, leadership and problem-solving skills."

The perception about the manufacturing sector is that it isn't very women-friendly. As a woman leader, what is it like to work in this industry?

I think the industry provides a very challenging, varied and interesting career opportunity for anyone with drive, leadership and problem-solving skills. I have been fortunate to have been given many opportunities in TCL, and progressively see more women working very successfully in this sector.

Is there any interesting anecdote that you would like to share?

I remember when I got my first job at a manufacturing site, they had to build me a changing facility before I could start work as I was the first woman manager in that area. Today, a number of our heads of operations and key leaders within Tata Chemicals are women. This makes for a much better balance of talent and skills at the workplace.

What, in your opinion, are the challenges for women working in manufacturing?

As a woman, in some instances, you have to prove your capabilities before you get fully accepted, but in my experience, once you pass that initial barrier, people see you as a person and do not focus on your gender or race. To break any perceived barriers, you have to have confidence and be on top of your job.

How can organisations support diversity at the workplace? Are there any specific policies at Tata Chemicals Europe that encourage and support diverse talent?

The biggest challenge for attracting young women into the industry is the unattractive image of engineering and industry in general. As a society, we need to work on that and communicate the wealth of opportunities that this sector provides. In reality, making products, managing people and running businesses are all hugely rewarding roles. Tata Chemicals has a good programme of working with local schools to improve understanding of what a career in industry can offer.

What advice would you pass on to younger women in the same field? Are the challenges greater or are organisations more supportive?

I encourage young women to consider a career in the industry. At TCL, apart from having many interesting jobs, I have particularly enjoyed opportunities to travel globally and to work with TCL colleagues across the globe; these are the sort of opportunities that young people look for in their careers.

BLURB: I believe young women today are more confident, and opportunities for talented young people in the industry have never been better.”