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Women in the Supply Chain: How Top Female Supply Chain Executives are Making a Difference

Does the glass ceiling still exist? Women now hold about 25 percent of the management positions in the petroleum sector, according to Women in Canada's Oil and Gas Sector, but most of them are employed in lower-level management positions, not as senior executives.

However, some women have broken all the barriers, and serve as leading executives in a primarily male-dominated supply chain management industry. Named "Top Female Leaders of the Supply Chain" by Supply & Demand Chain Executive, each has a unique perspective on what it takes for women to be successful in the field.

1. Stephanie Miles, Amber Road

Image via Flickr by See-ming Lee 李思明 SML

Stephanie Miles serves as the Senior Vice President of Commercial Services for Amber Road, an East Rutherford, New Jersey software company that specializes in global trade management systems for the import and export industries and third-party logistics companies. Miles has a degree in mathematics, and worked her way from the bottom up in the supply chain. Her key to success is helping make all departments across the company aware of issues, so no department is in the dark. She says the ability to see things from more than one perspective is important.

2. Laura Rokohl, Aspen Technology, Inc.

Image via Flickr by ravik694

Laura Rokohl serves as the Supply Chain Manager for Aspen Technology, which is a software and services company that caters to the processing industries, including chemicals and polymers. Rokohl does the marketing research to help these clients define and improve their processes. She believes that the complexity of the supply chain is what makes it most challenging, and says the key to improving employment opportunities for women in the industry is to encourage more females to pursue education in math, science, and engineering.

3. Mickey North Rizza, Bravo Solution

Image via Flickr by bredgur

Mickey North Rizza is the Vice President of Strategic Services for Bravo Solutions, a company that helps other businesses analyze their spending for better profit margins. She sees the talent shortage and a young, undereducated workforce as the industry's most significant problem, and believes the answer lies in better talent identification and developing employees.

4. Kelly Barner, Buyers' Meeting Point

Image via Flickr by Paul Lowry

Kelly Barner is the co-owner of Buyers' Meeting Point, which is an online resource for supply chain managers and procurement professionals to gather industry knowledge and make connections. She sees the crucial component of successful supply chain management as better communications. Barner uses her experiences on both sides of negotiations as a key to her success. She holds an MBA, as well as a Master's Degree in Library and Information Science.

5. Jessica Sanchez, Bard, Inc.

Image via Flickr by Muffet

Jessica Sanchez is the Sourcing Systems Manager for Bard, Inc., formerly known as C.R. Bard. The company manufacturers medical equipment used around the globe, with headquarters in Murray Hill, New Jersey. She sees the biggest challenges in taxation and regulation. She believes the ability to foresee changes in taxes and regulations is the best way for companies, particularly in the health care industry, is crucial for being able to make a profit.

Each of the women on the list have a different perspective on what it takes to make their companies successful. Yet each has proven their methods as successful for their companies. Their foresight and commitment to success helped earn them a spot on this prestigious list of powerful women in supply chain management.

[Case Study] How Argos Lowered Costs While Improving Efficiency

Argos is the biggest non-food retailer in the United Kingdom. Their annual sales are $6.7 billion. They sell home improvement products, lawn and garden items, and other home and electrical appliances from their catalog, website and 700 stores around the United Kingdom and Ireland. During their rapid growth, Argos needed to improve the efficiency of their warehouses, and chose Vanderlande Industries to provide their automation solutions.

Situation

Image via Flickr by informatique

Argos needed an automated distribution center to centralize their inventory along with a warehouse control system to handle inventory. Their goals were to handle the rapid growth of their company by increasing product availability. Since many of the company's products are offered year round, they needed to expand their product range, while lowering operational costs and improving their price competitiveness.

The accuracy of their supply and pick up services is critical. Their goal was to centralize the distribution system of their small items and concentrate supplier deliveries to a single site to improve their picking efficiency. They also needed better control of their direct imports, a growing percentage of their product offerings, and to improve the efficiency of their reverse logistics system.

Approach

Vanderlande Industries was able to meet Argos' needs by setting up an automated system for storing and retrieving these small products. It included a system for warehouse control, and maximized the efficiency of the floor space in their warehouse by 40 percent. The automated system offered them better control, with fewer human errors to plague their distribution center. It also allowed multiple orders with the same product to be handled simultaneously. The solution included a system for controlling their direct imports, as well as automation of their reverse logistics processes.

Impact and Advantages

As a result of installing the workload automation system, operational costs dropped. Argo was able to offer more products, and deliver these products to customers and to their other store locations more efficiently with greater accuracy. The system also improved efficiency of the warehouse, and freed resources for other tasks. Their system for direct imports improved, as did their handling of reverse logistics. The system automatically stores and retrieves items without the need for human laborers, which lessens instances of human error in packaging and shipping.

The system stores bulk products and allows these products to be parceled out to each store or to customers who order via the company's website or product catalog. Argos has thereby been able to maintain competitive prices and keep up with the rapid growth and expansion of the company. They have also been able to offer a wider variety of products, and to keep seasonal items in stock for year round availability. The work is faster, cheaper, more efficient and experiences fewer errors in packaging and delivering to their retail stores and end customers.

Argos is satisfied with the system provided by Vanderlande Industries and expresses a desire to continue the relationship for future projects, such as new innovations or expansions. According to Argos, Vanderlande Industries offered the best return on investment out of all the companies which submitted proposals for the automation project.

What Does Explosive Growth in the Asian Sector Mean for Everyone Else?

For years, companies in the U.S. and Europe have turned to cheap labor forces in Asia to manufacture products. At the time, this was beneficial to the companies, which saved money and could offer cheaper products, and to the workers, who had access to jobs and job training that led to greater wealth and prosperity. Now, countries like China and India have an educated workforce with disposable incomes, and they're no longer content to make stuff for the West while those foreign companies take the lion's share of the profits.

The Asian Market is Changing

Image via Flickr by Roberto Verzo

As China, India, and other Asian markets emerge with their own companies producing wealth, they're switching from a status of primary exporters to importers of goods. Not only have Western companies lost the workforce they depended on to produce, they're missing potential sales until they can produce products to ship to the emerging middle class in Asia. Some of these companies kept manufacturing facilities in the U.S., and it's merely a matter of vamping up efforts to make production quotas. Others, however, closed up shop in the U.S. and now have to start over from scratch.

Industries Most Affected by the Changes

This shift is changing business operations for most industries. Oil and power generation is in huge demand as Asian companies need greater resources to fuel their new businesses and industries. Much of the clothing sold by European and U.S. retailers is produced in Asia, and this is likely to drive up prices for these commodities. Many electronics companies are shifting their labor force from Asia back to the U.S., along with locksmiths, light bulb manufacturers, automotive manufacturing companies, and many others. Virtually no aspect of global trade will go unaffected by this shift in the labor force.

What These Changes Mean to the West

Manufacturing in the U.S. is now almost as affordable as making the products with U.S. labor forces. This trend could bring jobs back to the U.S. from Asia, which might help the economy finally begin to bounce back from the throes of recession. The loss of cheap labor, however, could drive prices of goods up further. Western companies have already started to scale back on their projects involving Asian expansion. But many companies are looking to undeveloped nations, primarily in Asia, South America, and Africa, to fill the void of cheap labor.

Other Markets Ready to Rise

Indonesia, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Brazil, Ethiopia and other undeveloped nations have seen the wealth and prosperity gained by their neighbors from providing cheap labor to developed countries in the West. These nations are in much the same situation as China and India before the trend toward outsourcing. They lack the skills and training to become competitors in the global marketplace, but have almost limitless potential.

The downside to moving production to these regions is the lack of a trained labor force and infrastructure. Training workers is expensive, and until the manufacturing facilities have adequate power, roads to transport goods, security, and other necessary infrastructure is in place, it's difficult to start the process. Most likely, Western companies will be split on the decision, some opting to bring manufacturing back to the U.S., while others work towards training workers and building the infrastructure to make the cheap labor in these undeveloped nations accessible to the global marketplace.

No one knows for sure what the future holds, but the face of manufacturing is certainly changing.

[Case Study] Proctor & Gamble Tackles Transportation Issues

Proctor & Gamble employs 130,000 workers in 80 countries, offering a variety of consumer products under an array of brand names. In 2005, this $55 billion company acquired Gillette, a Cincinnati, Ohio based company which provides razors, Oral-B dental health products, Braun shavers, Duracell batteries, and various small appliances. Gillette's distribution center for products sold in the United Kingdom is in Reading.

Situation

Image via Flickr by Phil Manker

When Proctor & Gamble acquired Gillette, the company needed to integrate Gillette's distribution into their own. Gillette relied on its own vehicles supplemented by sub contracted transportation companies to distribute its goods. DHL/Exel distribution partnered with Gillette for logistics services. Proctor & Gamble sought to upgrade the warehouse management system at the Reading distribution center of Gillette and chose Swisslog to provide the system. Their goal was to meet growing customer demands, to integrate Gillette's distribution system into Proctor & Gamble's established logistics system, and to improve the planning and order delivery at its Gillette warehouse in Reading. Gillette operates another U.K. facility in Islesworth.

Approach

Swisslog met with managers and decision makers of Proctor & Gamble and Gillette and developed a system to improve pallet stacking in the distribution trailers. They also incorporated a system of order picking and added new functionality to the process. The system was designed to handle the entire order process, from the time an order came in to the Reading facility until the product was dispatched via truck. The pallet stacking system was capable of identifying items stacked on pallets that were top only stackable, non-stackable, or rated for stackability factors.

Impact and Advantages

The result of Gillette's new warehouse management system was an increase in the efficiency of pallet stacking in trailers of 35 percent. Workers and managers were able to get more accurate data on products set for transport and use a screen monitoring system to keep track of the progress. Loads stacked in trucks are now more stable, and Gillette is able to configure loads according to customer requirements.

This has resulted in a higher level of control over the distribution process, lower instances of errors during the process, and lower numbers of customer claims due to items damaged during transportation. It is now easier to plan for shipment transporting with the LoadBuilder system by Swisslog, which allows workers to stack pallets more efficiently as well as more safely.

Gillette states their level of customer service has improved, along with the efficiency of their operations. Operational costs are down, and workers have a more accurate picture of their inventory, orders, and the transportation process. Since computers plan for loading trailers, workers are freed from much of the hassle of planning how to load trucks efficiently and safely. Better use of vehicle space reduces transportation costs, adding the capacity for larger shipment loads so more products can be shipped with fewer truck loads, saving money on fuel, and other transportation expenses.

DHL/Exel have partnered with Swisslog to produce a web version of the system used by Gillette. This system should improve the processes in other warehouses and distribution centers around the United Kingdom.

What Will Logistics Look Like Tomorrow?

With the recent innovations in technology, environmental policy, and the global supply chain, it's no surprise that the logistics industry is also undergoing tremendous changes. The transportation industry is trying to clean up their bad environmental reputation and use new technologies to make it easier, faster, and more efficient to transport goods to businesses and consumers. What will the changes lead to?

Shrinking Need for the Middlemen

Image via Flickr by didbygraham

The traditional business model has always been manufacturer to retailer to consumer. As businesses move toward online sales, and away from brick and mortar installations, there is less need for the retail middleman. Businesses and consumers are increasingly ordering online directly from the manufacturer.

This is true for large corporations and industries ordering huge amounts of raw materials, and equally true for individuals ordering for small family needs. Logistics will move away from the large-scale transports to retailers, but this business is being replaced by the transport of goods to distribution warehouses closer to customers from which the goods can be shipped directly.

Customers and Logistics Companies Respond in Realtime

Consumers' ability to track their deliveries from the manufacturer to their home or business is getting an upgrade. In addition to the current practice of tracking the location of packages, logistics companies can begin offering services such as the ability to monitor the temperature and humidity where the package is. Customers and logistics can then make real-time adjustments to improve the quality of the merchandise upon delivery. This takes the guesswork out of when goods will arrive and what condition they'll be in when they get there.

Urban Growth Complicates Logistics

According to DHL, the largest logistics firm in the world, half of the world's population will live in urban areas in less than five years. Crowded highways and byways are going to complicate transportation, but big data initiatives may compensate for this to some extent. Smarter traffic lights that can respond to traffic bottlenecks are just one example of how big data analysis and predictive systems can alleviate the difficulties of inner city transportation.

Environmental Concerns Change the Way Logistics Companies Operate

Worries over climate change, pollution, and the effect of mass transportation of goods and people on the earth are causing huge changes in logistics. Companies are finding innovative ways to reduce the fuel consumption of big rigs, trains, ships, and other transportation vehicles. There are also huge strides in making all forms of transportation less polluting to the environment. Tomorrow's logistics will be cleaner, greener, and more efficient.

Technology Produces Smarter Logistics

Big data analysis is going to impact logistics far beyond aiding in urban traffic jams. Together with the cloud, big data is helping to create smarter logistics. Computers can quickly find new routes when weather or political unrest make travel in a particular area more difficult. These computers can also route drivers more efficiently, allow companies to provide better customer service with fast response even during the busiest times, and find ways to make deliveries cheaper by using less fuel. Tomorrow's logistics will be more efficient because big data analysis can predict bottlenecks before they become a problem and reroute resources to compensate.

It's an exciting time for supply chains, and changes in logistics could make all these jobs easier, quicker, and more efficient.