

Clients respond to personal touch

Alison France is the managing director of independent highway development specialists Sanderson Associates. She talks to Highways about the advantages of smaller consultants and making it as a woman in a male-dominated business

Recent career history?

I have been managing director of Sanderson Associates since 2005, having been appointed a director in 1997.

What are your main priorities as MD?

To market the company and look after our clients and our staff. Satisfied clients and motivated staff are absolutely essential to our success. So, too, is financial discipline in these challenging economic times.

How is the economic slowdown affecting the highways industry?

Some major projects have stopped abruptly, but it is not all doom and gloom. We are getting more work from discount supermarkets, for example, and the fall in the price of land means that developers are beginning to buy land again – and instruct us. It is important to remember that the economic slowdown presents opportunities.

What advantages do you as a smaller independent consultant have over the multi-nationals?

We can instantly react to our clients' wishes and the market. If a request is made in the morning, we can have the answer by lunchtime. We are very flexible and, crucially, we ensure that the relationship between our staff and our clients is very strong. Our staff feel personally involved with our clients and that doesn't always happen in larger companies.

Why are there so few women in the industry in senior positions?

This is a difficult question to answer. I suppose the idea of working in civil engineering, which

is perceived as a male-dominated world, isn't attractive to many women, so it's a bit of a vicious circle. It is also true that I achieved my big career breaks at an age when many women would have been thinking about starting a family. You have to be very focused to get to the very top and that is difficult if there is pressure at home. I think it is a pity there are not more women in senior positions – hopefully this will change in years to come.

Is there still a skills shortage in the industry?

I don't think there is a technical skills shortage, but I think there are improvements that could be made within the industry when it comes to understanding exactly the clients wants and needs. Improvements, in my view, could always be made when it comes to negotiating and communication skills.

What is the worst example of sexism you have suffered?

I can only remember one, but I'm sure others may have gone over my head. When I was a newish employee of a local council I was sitting in a room with about 20 men. We were all waiting for the meeting to begin, when one man said: "We are just waiting for Mr A France." They hadn't realised I was there already.

Business achievement you are most proud of?

Can I have two? The obvious one is becoming managing director of Sanderson Associates three years ago, but I am also immensely proud that many of my clients have been with me since I joined the company 18 years ago.



Best piece of advice a colleague has ever given you?

It was before I appeared as an expert witness at my first public inquiry and a Solicitor said: "Only answer the question asked. Don't elaborate." That can be good advice outside a public inquiry, too.

What was your first job?

I was a paper girl in Meltham, near Holmfirth, in West Yorkshire in 1978 when I was 14.

What car do you drive?

Today a Vauxhall Astra.

Pet hate on the roads?

I do not like tractors or very slow vehicles on country roads. I think this stems from my dislike of being late for meetings.

What action would you take if you were transport secretary for the day?

I would freeze road tax for a week.

How do you think the public perceive transport professionals?

This is best summed up by a conversation that I have had more than once when I answer the question of what I do. "Oh" comes the reply, "I didn't know people did that. I thought it just happened."