

A woman who's streets ahead on the road to engineering success

PROFILE

Alison France, managing director of consulting engineering firm Sanderson Associates, is helping to keep the UK's traffic moving. **Lizzie Murphy** reports.

ORGANISING traffic flow doesn't sound like the most glamorous job in the world, but Alison France is making her mark on the country's roads.

Her company, Sanderson Associates, advises on the traffic aspects of a huge range of developments, from large shopping centres and industrial estates, to access issues surrounding a new house or garage.

The firm, based in Grange Moor, Huddersfield, operates throughout the UK but has worked on some of the region's biggest projects, including the new £200m retail quarter in Wakefield.

Highway and traffic engineering isn't the first choice of career for many women, but for Ms France, it involves two of her favourite passions – reading maps and technical drawing.

She said: "I've always liked reading maps and technical drawing and so, after my A-levels, I started to look for jobs within town planning or engineering, because both of those jobs involved the things I loved doing."

"In the beginning, sometimes people said the reason I wanted to go into engineering was because of all the men, but I liked the job and it stemmed from there. Being a woman wasn't an issue for me."

Ms France, 44, who was born in Huddersfield, started her career as a technician at West Yorkshire County Council and also studied civil engineering part-time.

From there, she worked her way up through roles in the highways and engineering departments at Leeds City Council and Kirklees Council before she was head-hunted by Sanderson Associates where she became a traffic engineer in 1990.

She was promoted to director in 1997 and in 2005 she took over as managing director. She has since put her own stamp on the company which celebrates its 21st birthday this year.

"Initially, I didn't think I would



ROAD SENSE: Alison France likes reading maps and technical drawing. Picture: Simon Hulme

change a lot, but, actually, I have," said Ms France.

Since she became managing director, Sanderson Associates has moved from Scissett to new offices in Grange Moor, with an internet café for staff without the risk of transferring a virus to the company computer system.

She also installed a new system to enable invoicing to be more traceable and easier and taken on people to specifically chase late payments, which, with hindsight, was a canny move given how the economy has since deteriorated.

She said: "The system has worked well, particularly within

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the market at the moment. It's ensured that our cashflow is really good."

In contrast with other firms involved in the construction industry, Sanderson Associates is also recruiting people and its portfolio of work shows no sign of stopping in the economic slowdown.

There are currently more than 50 staff at the company, including an office in Lincoln, and Ms France is looking for a further six employees as work continues to flow in.

The firm's diversity is helping it to weather the economic storm, she said. It provides services, including traffic assessments and surveys, giving evidence in court cases and at public inquiries, as well as advising on issues such as street lighting, speed limits and car parking.

When the economy was booming, the company's books were dominated by developments such as fitness centres and restaurants. But now the firm is seeing an increasing number of

ALISON FRANCE

■ **Title:** Managing director of Sanderson Associates.
■ **Date of birth:** January 24, 1964.
■ **Education:** Technical college, Leeds University.
■ **First job:** Paper round.
■ **Favourite song:** *The Division Bell* by Pink Floyd.
■ **Car driven:** Vauxhall Astra.
■ **Favourite film:** *O Brother, Wherefore Art Thou*.

■ **Favourite holiday destination:** Maldives.
■ **Last book read:** *Anyone Can Do It, My Story*, by Duncan Bannatyne.
■ **What I am most proud of:** Becoming managing director of Sanderson Associates and having clients still coming to us after 21 years.

supermarket developments and discount retailers on its books.

Another area which has brought in extra work since 2006 is flooding. Although it's something in which the company has always worked, local authorities now require flood-risk assessment as part of the planning submission.

Ms France said: "The market has quietened down over the last year but we are still busy, still working a lot of hours. It's quite stressful at times but we are enjoying it and we are in a lucky position."

"We are very specialised in our areas of work and very lucky in

that we have a large number of specialist staff under one roof, which enables us to deal with any issue. We differ from other companies because we have a large knowledge base in one location. There's not one area in traffic that we can't deal with."

She added: "We are very happy to be where we are at the moment and I expect the company to grow towards the end of next year. We have made space for more staff and we are also stepping up with marketing."

Marketing has been a key tool for the company this year. It started its first campaign last

February, which has freshened up its image.

Ms France said: "It's very difficult to say what the impact has been so far but I think people are more aware of us now."

"We are well known anyway, so we are trying to put our name forward to potential clients who haven't heard of us, but we also want to make sure that we keep in contact with the clients that we have."

One of the best things about being a woman in such a male-dominated industry, said Ms France, is that people remember her.

"Quite often, people might not need assistance for two or three years and they will still remember me. That's the biggest difference," she said.

She added: "I've got female staff but I would like to see more women because the profession is very male-orientated. There are lots of different job opportunities and the work varies so rapidly and I've met so many different people. It's not the boring job that people think."

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