

Entrepreneurial Women in Renewable Energy



My story...

Bernice Roberts

Director and principal environmental planner, The Landmark Practice

An inspirational woman who has worked her way up the environmental industry, Bernice shares with us her story of how she became the head of planning and renewables.

Having a strong environmental background, Bernice originally trained as an environmental scientist in the late seventies with a particular focus on ecology and planning. Career opportunities in sustainable development were scarce at the time - the term itself wasn't adopted until the Bruntland Report set the first agenda for global action in 1987. Renewable energy was still at a relatively primitive stage of development, with (other than hydro power) almost no deployment in the UK. Without an engineering background it certainly wasn't a career option." The idea of establishing a business on a 'green' led development approach was a bit of a gamble in the 1980s, but the work really took off and we've not looked back since."

"There is no easy answer to the question of family obligations. Working around family life requires immense effort, commitment and energy. You will have to have ask my children for their thoughts on where we got it right (the fact that they are well-adjusted adults and one has a career supporting the climate vulnerable countries is a source of pride."

Bernice established the planning arm at the Landmark Practice and is now the head of planning and renewables. Probably the biggest personal achievement at work was being part of the team that got planning permission for wind turbines at Avonmouth, where a genuine balance was achieved between energy demand, environmental, technical and cost constraints and benefit to the community (a pretty good description of sustainable development).

When asked what the benefits of having a career in the energy industry are, Bernice simply answered 'opportunity'. She went on to emphasise that "the renewable energy industry is relatively young. Managed correctly it is environmentally benign and offers a genuine chance to deliver climate compatible development, which is critical if we are to tackle climate change. Personally, that's a strong driver to work in the sector."

"The sector is also intellectually challenging, at a technical and political level. Maintaining up to date technical competence is always stimulating, as is keeping elected representatives on their toes. Politicians, in general, have short attention spans and should be regularly reminded of the continuous and sustained efforts needed to meet global needs, rather than their focus on the next election."

Having worked in the development sector her entire career, Bernice is no stranger to a male dominated environment, and has witnessed numerous examples of sexism. "A developer client once openly called a male colleague to check the veracity of my technical advice 'just in case'. Whilst such explicit bias is hopefully less prevalent today, I am aware that female colleagues are still sometimes labelled as 'assertive' when they hold a line in discussion that probably would not be registered as such in a male counterpart." Bernice notes that it is essential to respond professionally when on the receiving end of unfortunate comments. A healthy sense of irony helps, as does having an intelligent management system which acknowledges everyone's values in the workplace.

When asking Bernice what advice she would give to others, she said, "Make sure you follow a career path you believe in, ideally with like-minded people. Your working culture is very important; a positive culture helps you to maintain motivation and enthusiasm. Look outwards; we tend to get bogged down with the details of the day to day work, so keep abreast of what's happening outside, seek out and promote realistic opportunities, and support them with a good business case. If you want to be involved in management, you need a sound understanding of what managing a business involves, as well as the technical aspects of the job."