



My story...

Cordi O'Hara

Director, UK System Operator at National Grid

A dynamic woman who embraces and embodies the positive differences which women bring to a historically male dominated sector and who is a firm believer in 'the art of the possible'.

Cordi joined National Grid in early 2014 and in her current role she oversees the strategic, financial and operational performance of the UK System Operator at National Grid. Prior to this, Cordi had been at Centrica since 1998 and spent eight years in gas and electricity trading roles, which she found very fulfilling and rewarding but were particularly specialist in nature. It was her strategic move into a more general management role, where she initially dealt with asset optimisation and the end-to-end process of accountability across group businesses, which Cordi now heralds as one of the biggest milestones in her career. One that has continued to guide the choices she has since made.

Given the seniority of her current position and the nature of her previous roles, it's no surprise that a natural confidence seems to be an intrinsic part of Cordi's manner. Having been "the only female in the room" for much of her career, she describes how it took a lot of confidence to not be intimidated by this gender imbalance, particularly in her earlier career: "My confidence grew over time, particularly when I recognised that being the only female is an opportunity, rather than a disadvantage. That was something which, for me, came with age and experience. So I'd say to other women looking at a similar career that the sooner you can adopt the mind-set that 'I'm positively different and this is my opportunity' the better. Recognising that as early as possible is a great way to propel your career in a male dominated environment."

"Don't hide that you're different or try to be more like a man, because you'll be disadvantaged by not playing to your strengths. Have confidence and self-belief in the positive difference that you bring to the table, because it's actually a very liberating and positive experience."

Having a gender neutral name has added an extra facet to Cordi's experience of working in senior positions within the energy industry, as throughout her career external correspondence to her at Centrica, and into her early days at National Grid, commonly referred to her as 'Mr'. This hasn't, however, been something that has bothered Cordi: "The default assumption is 'that would be a man', because very senior positions within the energy industry are more likely to be held by men than women, but I've always chosen to find it amusing rather than see it as a problem."

People's preconceptions don't stop there, however. Cordi describes how "people are often surprised that I'm married with two very young children, because there's often a perception that if you're going to be very senior in this industry then you're likely to have made certain choices about your home life." Despite what you might think, however, Cordi is not an advocate of the 'you can have it all' mantra. On the contrary, she describes a refreshingly honest and pragmatic approach to balancing both a high-flying career and a family life: "You've got to decide what you're willing to trade-off in order to have a big job and a family. It's as much about the setup at home as it is at work and I always say be a bit careful which partner you choose!" Cordi accepts that certain requirements of having a senior position, such as nights away from home, are inevitable but she takes care to ensure that these demands are met within a framework of rules that also safeguard important elements of her home life, such as school plays, parents' evenings and being able to put her children to bed a certain number of nights a week. Being explicit about her rules has enabled Cordi to feel very confident about the balance that she has chosen: "I recognise that it might be very different to other people's view of 'balance' but that's what works for me, my family and my work environment."

"If you set clear expectations early with those that you work with and for, it's often all very doable. I've set rules that are important for me but it's about the need to work together in order to achieve those balances. 'Can we make that work?' is a really important conversation to have."

When talking with Cordi it's clear that she is highly driven and motivated, but she explains that the nature and source of this impetus has evolved throughout her career. Initially, Cordi was primarily driven by a thirst to prove herself and achieve self-sufficiency. The first from either side of her family to attend university and pursue a professional career, proving that somebody from her background could 'make it' independently was a big driving force for Cordi. Now, however, she takes pride in helping to shape the future of the new energy system and revels in the reward and fulfilment of taking on a challenge, solving a problem and moving her business and the industry forward. Throughout her career, Cordi feels privileged to have worked with some fantastic people and brilliant minds but her mother has always been a particular inspiration: "My mother has been an amazing role model to me and she's always instilled this drive for hard work, rising to any challenge and working well with others. Her values and principles have always been a driving force for me." Cordi also describes how, throughout her career, she has been in very fortunate positions where the people she has worked for have proactively developed and sponsored her. "They've been very inspirational and have helped me realise the art of the possible within my own self. I've always said pick the company you work for wisely – you've got to be in an organisation that shares similar values to you so can thrive and work with great people who both inspire you and get the best out of you."

"I've worked with some very forward-thinking men who saw my potential, promoted me and took risks on me before I'd realised I was willing to take a risk on myself. They had the risk appetite that women often don't have, because sometimes we want to over-prove ourselves before we think we can move on, but they saw the potential in me and helped me fulfil it."

As Chair of Women in National Grid, Cordi is a powerful advocate in the promotion of more gender diversity within the industry and encourages women to make conscious decisions about their career: "Have your full self at work, enjoy your job and do it for the right reasons – not because it's something you think you have to 'tick off'. Always do something that is of interest and which leverages your strengths." Equally, she would encourage men to think differently and take that same 'risk' that was offered to her.