

High (w)heels in the auto industry

While it seems men continue to dominate the world of vehicle construction and coatings, the sound of heels across the showroom floor is becoming more common. Bavita Valab, Kansai Plascon's Automotive Coatings Division brand manager, shares her journey of working for the South African paint manufacturer.

Bavita believes the growing number of women in the technical workplace can be attributed to increased access to technical education and training for women, as well as shifting cultural expectations, opportunities and aspirations. And the numbers speak for themselves.

Global research conducted by career-focused app LinkedIn reveals that growing numbers of women have entered industries which were previously dominated by males and this is most notably in the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) sector.

- Test development engineer (+243%)
- Automotive salesperson (+154%)
- Technical sales professional (+133%)
- Architect (+127%)
- Physicist (+116%)
- Public safety (+118%)
- Construction (+77%)
- Consumer goods (+71%)
- Design (+70%)
- Agriculture (+67%)

Bavita says the research results validate her view that more women are choosing traditionally male-dominated roles and are thriving in these roles.

"I am happy to report that providing equal opportunities in the workplace for both males and females is fundamental to Kansai Plascon's employee programme, which recognises that diversity is key to business success," she says.

Armed with an honours degree in marketing and business management, Bavita joined Kansai Plascon's automotive paint team in January 2017. As brand manager, she is responsible for the branding and public image of the company's full range of automotive paints.



Bavita Valab, Kansai Plascon's Automotive Coatings
Division brand manager

She shares her journey with Bizcommunity.

▣ ***How did you choose your career?***

After completing matric, I was overwhelmed by the choice of study options. I eventually jotted down the pros and cons of each and, after much debate, decided to study marketing. At this point, I did not even imagine being in the automotive industry, but I could not have made a better decision.

▣ ***Where did your career begin?***

Finding a job as a graduate was not easy. I must have applied online for over 100 jobs, gone for 25 interviews within various industries and, just when I was about to give up, I was employed as a marketing intern at a cement manufacturing company.

Being a petite young lady with a marketing intern designation made it very challenging for people to take me seriously, but I succeeded and was promoted to marketing assistant. It was great having a qualification but getting to know how the industry worked and building strong, meaningful relationships required visiting building sites, conducting research, attending lots of meetings and workshops, but most importantly - staying true to myself. By investigating various cement manufacturing factories and getting to know my colleagues, I learnt how cement was manufactured, packaged, marketed and sold.

▣ ***How did you move into the automotive coatings industry?***

Like a true millennial, I was always on the lookout for new opportunities. I realised the growing demand for higher education and started studying part-time for my honours degree. I wanted to grow my experience within other industries and, to my surprise, I received the opportunity to enter the automotive coatings industry - but this time as a brand manager.

I thought I had it all mapped out, but producing, marketing and selling automotive paint was not as simple as it sounded. The industry is niche and there are various technologies and paints required for different substrates.

A brand manager has a lot of responsibility and needs to have a complete understanding of how each department in the company works, in order to be successful. I attended various induction programs, one of them where I received the opportunity to view the spray-painting process from start to finish and even do some spray-painting myself.

Within the first four months at Kansai Plascon, I was thrown into the deep end and had to present my brands at the annual automotive conference. This was a great learning curve for me as I improved on my presentation and networking skills, got to know all the people with whom I would be working and gained a lot of industry insight. Thereafter, I visited various automotive paint stores to determine how best I could market my brands.

▣ ***So, what next?***

There are endless opportunities in the automotive industry as there is a growing demand for vehicle production, especially in passenger vehicles. There is so much more that I still need to experience and learn, people to meet and brands to grow and market within the coatings industry.

I currently have a great team and an amazing manager who always provides the support and advice that I require to grow and to motivate others. From all the experiences that I have had so far, I have learnt that self-belief, education and confidence are tools for success which nobody can take away from you.

■ ***What advice do you have for young women out there interested in a career in automotive coatings or other traditionally male-dominated industries?***

Stay focused, have a clear vision of where you want to be. Recognise opportunities and work hard to take advantage of those opportunities. Get to the point - avoid long meetings and advise what needs to be done as quickly as possible, this will save your team and yourself a lot of time.

Don't take things personally, get the job done and complete it to the best of your ability, rise above challenges and succeed in the workplace.

Confidence is key. Recognise different personalities and management styles - this will assist in becoming a great leader and learning how to communicate effectively with everyone.

The words of American businesswoman Jillian Michaels really resonate with me. She says, "It's not about being perfect, it's about effort. And when you bring that effort every single day, that's where transformation happens... and that's how change occurs."

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