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INDUSTRIAL PRACTICE > AUTOMOTIVE

THE CRITICAL ROLE FOR FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN THE MASH-UP OF DETROIT AND SILICON VALLEY

Five female automotive executives discuss implications for women aspiring to leadership roles in this transforming industry hard at work on the “car of the future.”

Executive talent from the traditionally male-dominated sectors of technology in the Silicon Valley and automotive in Detroit are coming together in unexpected ways to develop the cars of the not-too-distant future. Personal mobility soon will include some combination of the following.

The driverless car

A driverless car can automatically detect and navigate its environment without human intervention, opening new frontiers for personal mobility as well as for improved safety on our streets and highways.

The connected car

The connected car brings together the customer's digital life, from infotainment to traffic snarl-avoiding dynamic navigation, while continuously streaming data to the manufacturer to anticipate component wear issues, manage parts inventory, and provide a seamless service experience at the car dealership.

The zero-emissions car

Highly efficient, environmentally friendly transportation, the zero-emissions car is made of lightweight materials and runs on electricity from a battery recharged every time the brakes are applied, or from a generator connected to a hydrogen fuel cell.

Each of the major automotive OEMs are hard at work developing these capabilities, but they need fresh thinking from the tech world to keep pace with their new competition. Tesla has demonstrated the disruptive power of a well-organized start-up, popularizing high-performance electric cars (and creating new sales models). And tech giants Google and Apple are developing their own take on personal mobility, launching autonomous car projects that they confidently expect will surpass anything the existing automakers can develop.

In the mash-up of Detroit and Silicon Valley, the key ingredient will be talent, and organizations that underestimate the capabilities of female talent will be making a huge mistake

Will the increased convergence and migration of talent from Silicon Valley to Detroit — and vice versa — further solidify existing barriers for aspiring women leaders? Or does it present new opportunities for women who can bridge technology with automotive product development and manufacturing expertise?

New opportunities for women executives

The women we interviewed each saw the mash-up of these two divergent sectors as an opportunity for women leaders in the automotive industry.

"Progress for women in leadership roles in the auto industry has been slower than people had hoped," says Cindy Niekamp, senior vice president at PPG Automotive Coatings. "The financial crisis halted progress for several years. But there's new opportunity now. Transformational opportunities attract top talent of both genders. And the auto industry is definitely undergoing transformation."

Francoise Colpron, group president for North America at Valeo, agrees. "The auto industry is at a crossroads," says Colpron. "We collectively need to be humble — it's going to be disruptive, and no one really knows where we are headed. Women will be important in helping lead the transformation."

Disruption and transformation often lead to new opportunity, agrees Tonya Hallett, Cadillac's HR director. "There's a war for talent. Transformation often leads to the need to hire those who thrive in an environment that is going through change," Hallett says. "The organization that wins the war is the one that recruits for the best person for the job and eliminates unconscious bias when developing the winners who will rise to the top, regardless of their gender."

To keep up with the rapid pace of technology, automakers and suppliers need to proactively seek the smartest minds for the top jobs, regardless of gender, says Kim Adler,

vice president of communications, sustainability, and government affairs at global aluminum supplier Novelis: “It’s highly competitive in automotive, and the best talent wins, whether leading a support function or a vehicle program.”

Jenny Watson, vice president for digital marketing and direct at AutoNation, sees increased opportunities in both the tech and auto industries, but with a significant caveat: “If both industries acknowledge the need for women leaders, it will be a huge advantage and will help drive the transformation.”

Unique qualities women leaders bring to the transformation

Women often have innate strengths that can serve them well in an industry undergoing transformation, Niekamp says. “As auto and tech come together in disruptive fashion, white space emerges where there is no clear road map to overcome gaps in knowledge and experience. Those who are adept at managing and overcoming white space, to serve as bridge builders between functions and siloes that haven’t worked together in the past, will be in high demand,” she says. “This is an opportunity for women leaders. It requires a mind sense that can see across functions, make connections for the people in those organizations, with a strong ability to collaborate across disciplines and facilitate true diversity of thinking to encourage new ideas and solutions. These leadership skills aren’t exclusive to women, but women leaders often excel at them.”

Thought leaders who bring a digital orientation to their work in the auto industry will be at the helm of transforming the next generation of vehicles, Hallett says: “Today, we plan, purchase, socialize, and conduct business using digital technology. Talent with an innate digital mind-set will help innovate the next generation of vehicles with advanced and consumer-relevant technologies.”

The future is already arriving in the form of mass-produced all-electric cars and aluminum-intensive vehicles such as the Ford F-150 and Land Rover’s Range Rover. Says Adler, “The old paradigms for designing and manufacturing vehicles are changing, as are the business models, and women can help drive the change. However, women need to work together to help other women succeed.” As an executive sponsor of affinity group “Women in Novelis,” Adler encourages and mentors female colleagues while working to help accelerate recruitment, retention, and advancement of women at all levels of the company.

The case for gender diversity

“The business case for diversity is strong,” Niekamp says. “Teams with gender diversity are more creative and productive. For example, looking at innovation: studies have shown that patent generation produced by mixed-gender teams was 26–42% higher than on all-male teams. Mixing diverse people together is critical. We need to mix bold, creative people with practical, experienced incrementalists, to mix visionaries with pragmatists. This diversity of thinking can lead to new ideas and fresh approaches.”

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Advice from the Inside

Five tips for aspiring female auto industry leaders

“Leaning in for career advancement begins with believing in yourself. We often see in 360-degree evaluations that women rate themselves lower in their self-appraisals than others rate them. For men, it’s often the opposite. Positive self-awareness is critical for women.” — Cindy Niekamp

“It is hard to go from functional expertise to general management. I advise young women to seek roles in operations early in their careers (and in college to gravitate toward STEM majors). A career is not linear. Especially for a woman. You may make personal life decisions, but that doesn’t have to mean an end to opportunity in your career. Sometimes you make a choice to take a lateral step, and sometimes that can actually lead to more opportunity. Be open to challenging assignments — don’t talk yourself out of being considered.” — Francoise Colpron

“Relationships matter. My advice is to build a network across one’s industry and profession. As women, we should advocate for ourselves and one another — it’s a great way to promote the work we’re doing and inspire those who come behind us.” — Tonya Hallett

“Women cannot expect special treatment. We need to learn the rules of the game and play by them, at least in the near term. Gain respect and then we can work together to change the rules for the better.” — Jenny Watson

“Have an unfaltering belief in yourself. See the big picture, and know the strategic value-add of your work and your contributions to the bottom line. Never stop building your network, and always pay your success forward by helping others and bringing up the next generation.” — Kim Adler

“The key is to look at how you can improve the customer experience with technology — make your customers comfortable in their cars, make the technology comfortable, not jarring,” Watson says.

Leaders who can bring together people of many backgrounds and temperaments will be rewarded with the strongest results. That’s the power of inclusiveness.”

It begins with a commitment to move beyond narrow criteria when filling key roles. “A company that values diversity will be better positioned to win because of the varied experiences of its people,” says Hallett. “To grow and transform, an organization should be able to tap into a diverse range of thinking based on its employees’ professional and personal experiences, which can sometimes be gender specific, and when balanced, that’s completely okay.”

A focus on the customer

It used to be said that the auto industry most valued leaders who had “gasoline in their blood.” Now the industry seems to need those who have a customer focus in their blood.

The single most important factor in making the convergence of tech and auto succeed may be a focus on the customer. “Companies must put the customer at the center of everything they do — and they can’t do that well if they don’t have a strong representation of women leaders throughout the business,” says Colpron. “We can learn from consumer goods and service companies. Their cultures are more relationship based. And there are more women in very senior roles in those industries.”

“As we witness the convergence of the auto and tech industries and we work to provide seamlessly integrated technology, we must never forget the passion that our customers have for the driving experience,” Hallett

comments. “We can’t take our eye off the ball when it comes to being customer focused. We know that women play a major role in purchasing decisions, whether buying for themselves or for their families, and it makes sense to have a diverse workforce that reflects the consumer base purchasing our vehicles.”

Hallett continues: “A consumer-led focus drives us to ask questions like: How do we make life easier for our customers? How do people engage with their car and how can their car bring things together and help them interact with the rest of their lives? The more things we bring together in their lives to help simplify, the better. That’s what has made the smartphone so popular and important.”

Watson agrees that while the transformation throughout the car business may be enabled by technology, the central focus is on the customer: “The consumer is driving the big changes we see throughout the auto industry. For example, the changing experience consumers expect in the retail experience. The consumer struggles the most with our sales-delivery model — yet the industry sees it as highly successful. Consumer companies can’t live with that contradiction. The key is to look at how you can improve the customer experience with technology — make your customers comfortable in their cars, make the technology comfortable, not jarring. At the retail end, we know consumers don’t want to spend much time ‘shopping’ at the dealership — they want to do their research online before they get to the dealer. But the online experience for most car brands has been designed by men — and it shows. There is a huge opportunity to sell better to women.”

Attracting women to the auto industry requires a “change mind-set”

At the retail level, Watson says, “We have to be committed to change if we want to attract women to these jobs so dealerships can reflect the diversity of the consumers. It’s about compensation and working hours — it’s hard to attract women to work 60 hours a week without flexibility and be paid primarily on commission. Some dealer groups, primarily on the West Coast, are paying by salary. That’s just one example of the change mind-set we need in the auto industry today. We have to be open to new ways to do business throughout the value chain.” ■

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