

# Breaking the glass ceiling

While a truly diverse industry is still a work in progress, there are many female-led chemical distributors taking the sector a step closer to narrowing the gender gap

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A century ago, women of the U.S. were given the right to vote in a historic move paving the way toward gender equality in the country. Now, 100 years after the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, a lot has changed for women in business. However, achieving true equality and diversity in the workplace is an ongoing process in many industries – and the petrochemical sector is no exception.

A report published by KPMG in July this year suggests the chemical industry remains a laggard in respect to gender and ethnic diversity.

"You can count the number of female chemical company CEOs on one hand and when you look at ethnic diversity, the numbers aren't any better," according to the consultancy.

"Despite recent efforts, much more needs to be done to attract more women and Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) candidates into chemical engineering at the graduate level," it adds.

There are, however, many inspiring examples of female-led and owned U.S. petrochemical businesses that are moving the industry a step closer to gender diversity.

## SUCCESS STORIES

TRIInternational's CEO Megan Gluth-Bohan is one such example, having led the business since 2018 after serving as the company's general counsel and later, its president. Today, Gluth-Bohan is also TRI's majority owner, as well as a member of the NACD Board of Directors. She has also served on various NACD committees over the past several years.

While acknowledging her achievements, Gluth-Bohan stresses they are all a result of great effort over the years.

"Any rise to the top of a business is challenging. Being in the 'top spot' is earned. Period. It is a place of the highest responsibility, and therefore, there are no shortcuts around hard work," she says.

Gluth-Bohan has a background in law, having practiced as an attorney before entering the petrochemical industry. While she initially did not imagine her career progressing in the field of chemical distribution, she gradually became rather fond of it.

"Once I became immersed in the industry, I loved it. There are very few industries which touch so much of our lives. I find our business to be challenging, exciting, and even fun," she admits.

Gluth-Bohan was not discouraged by the fact the field is male-dominated. "I can't say the world of business law was full of women either," she jokes.

Jensen-Souders is another female-led business with Katie Pogue becoming the company's president in 2018, after serving two years as vice president in charge of sales and operations. Pogue has been familiar with the chemical industry since her childhood, with her grandfather starting Jensen-Souders and her father later taking over the leadership.

Despite the business being her family's legacy, Pogue's experience at the top of the company has had its hurdles.

"The biggest challenge I have faced is trusting myself to make the right decisions when dealing with employees and customers. I have learned the hard way that it's very important to listen to your team, but more important to trust your instincts," she says.

Just like TRIInternational's Gluth-Bohan, she notes the scarcity of women in the field.

"It didn't bother me that the industry was primarily men. The only downside so

**"I think the first step is recognizing where you are and setting diversity and inclusion goals for your company"**

Katie Pogue  
President, Jensen-Souders



## Things are changing for the better with more women taking the top jobs

far was the female restroom lights turning off on me due to lack of activity at a ChemEdge meeting in 2012," she says.

Liana Roberts of Cal-Chem, meanwhile, also took over the business from her father when she bought him out in 1990, becoming sole owner and president of the company.

Being the daughter of the owner and a woman in an even more male-dominant industry back in the 1990s made it extra challenging for Roberts to establish herself as a leader in the field.

"I was the only woman in the business at the time and had several hurdles to overcome. I was the first female president of the Coating Society and the Coatings Council. The first few years in this business were very difficult as an only woman in the industry in Detroit," she says.

While the qualities of a successful leader, and the hurdles on the way to the top, do not in theory differ substantially based on gender, there are certain challenges that women in business are

more likely to face. One such difficulty is keeping the balance between steady career growth and raising a family.

"I believe that my biggest challenge has been the dance of integrating my roles as a business and industry leader, with that of my role as a mother. I have faced challenges that my male counterparts simply have not," says Gluth-Bohan.

Pogue also stresses the importance of that balance, saying she took a two-year career break to start a family before returning to the industry in 2012.

## MAKING A CHANGE

While female-led chemical businesses still make up only a small percentage of the industry both in the U.S. and globally, Pogue certainly sees positive developments in the area.

"I believe we've made a lot of progress," she insists. "With NACD being comprised of many small businesses, we probably have an opportunity to change quicker than most, so I hope to see the trend continue."

Gluth-Bohan also stresses NACD's role in intro-

ducing female mentors who help and inspire other women looking to develop their careers in the field.

"I believe NACD has demonstrated tremendous leadership in the past several years in this regard. They often host workshops and breakout groups for women in the industry."

"There are so many companies and organizations which devote themselves to advancing the role of women, but there is nothing that will replace the mentorship and friendship of a woman who has been in your shoes," Gluth-Bohan adds.

Leaders have a responsibility and ability to boost diversity in their company, thereby improving the overall sector ratio.

"I think the first step is recognizing where you are



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Megan Gluth-Bohan  
CEO, TRIInternational

and setting diversity and inclusion goals for your company. As an example, in our company today, 30 percent of the workforce is female and 75 percent come from diverse backgrounds," says Pogue.

While admitting that there has been progress in the field, Roberts stresses that more industry-wide efforts are needed to narrow the gender gap further, particularly on the top floors of businesses.

## IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSITY

While the petrochemical industry is still behind in diversifying its leaders and employees, the consensus is that improving the overall ratio is the only way forward. Chemical companies are likely to start drawing talent from a much greater pool than before, potentially competing with the technology sector to obtain digitally proficient candidates, according to KPMG's report.

"More diverse candidates across gender, ethnicity, orientation, and skills, will be the path to greater profitability in the future," it says.

Encouraging young people of all backgrounds to pursue careers in STEM [science, technology, engineering and mathematics] is an important step that will help recruiters in the future. Data published by the Unesco Institute for Statistics (UIS) in June 2019 shows female researchers accounted for less than 30 percent of the global total.

Promoting diversity and inclusion creates a more appealing workplace and helps attract and retain better talent, while also making it easier to connect on a personal level with a larger pool of potential clients and partners.

"Studies have shown that companies with diversity of thought and opinion make better decisions," says Pogue. "How can we expect to be successful if the diversity of our company doesn't reflect the diversity of our customers or the communities that we serve?"

She also points out the importance of drawing from a wide pool of employees in terms of education as well.

"Not many of our employees had the opportunity or means to go to college, but because of their hard work they are able to have a salary that in most cases would be comparable to what they would make with a college degree," she says.

Diversity tends to improve work culture and help teams come up with alternative solutions and innovative decisions.

"Every business is at its best when there are a diverse set of people and viewpoints in our midst. I believe that diversity pushes ingenuity and creativity. On a personal level, I feel that each day at my company as I work alongside people who are different from me," says Gluth-Bohan.

"When we allow ourselves to be influenced by those who have not traditionally been in positions of leadership, we can be amazed at the growth that results from learning new perspectives." ■