



**MY MAIN
ADVICE TO
WOMEN IS
ALWAYS,
IDENTIFY
A MENTOR**



LAVERNE VAN WYK | EMPLOYEE



Name of Company:
Hansens Engineering
and Haldan Consulting



Highest Qualification:
Bachelor of Technology,
Industrial Engineering



Age:
33 years



Position in Company:
Director (Hansens),
General Manager
(Haldan)



Academic institution:
Nelson Mandela
University



**Years in the
organisation:**
Twelve years (Hansens)



Location:
Eastern Cape,
Gqeberha



INDUSTRIAL ENGINEERING MATCHES MY PERSONALITY

I grew up in an area that is full of gangsterism and poverty and I wouldn't like my kids to grow up there. My dad was a qualified teacher, and as a family we were very involved in the church, which helped keep me away from the wrong crowd growing up.

All my life I had planned to be a chartered accountant, but then, in my matric year, I joined an incubator programme. It was an introduction to engineering and included extra maths and science lessons. I loved it, and I excelled. An incentive for being a top performer was to spend the mid-year holidays at a university. We stayed on campus and lived university life, we were taken through the different engineering careers, we were able to check out the labs and the equipment. It was immersive education to give us a feel of engineering as a career.

When I got home after that experience, I found out I received a bursary from an automotive manufacturer to study engineering and a bursary from one of the top auditing companies to study chartered accountancy. This all happened in the same week! It was a pivotal moment in my life, and I made the life changing decision to study a Bachelor of Technology (BTech) in industrial engineering at Nelson Mandela University.

I know I made the right decision. Industrial engineering matches my personality and brings out my different strengths: analysis, engineering, a bit on the creative side, the people side and the numbers. So, I haven't left the numbers behind completely.

MY FIRST SIX MONTHS IN THE INDUSTRY WERE REALLY CHALLENGING

After my studies, I was supposed to intern with the company that gave me the bursary, but they closed their internship programme due to a dip in the economy. I applied for another programme which placed me at three different companies doing continuous improvement projects. I thought this was going to be the first six months of a very great career but unfortunately there was nothing great about my initial experiences.

I didn't have proper mentorship to guide me through my early days and being a young female on a shop floor where I had to look for improvements when people had been working there for decades, was a challenge.



IF I HAD NOT FOUND THE RIGHT SUPPORT SYSTEMS TOWARDS THE END OF THAT FIRST YEAR, I PROBABLY WOULD HAVE CHANGED CAREERS



When the six months ended, I took an opportunity at a company in Cape Town for three months. I was the senior project manager there and had a very good experience. Then I had to return to PE to finish two modules of my course. Back in PE I was placed at the company I work for today. I met the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), and I haven't looked back.

FROM TRAINEE TO BUSINESS PARTNER

Our CEO recognises that young people in the industry need mentorship and he took on that role in my life. We are now business partners and I work for two of his companies. I am a director of the company I started at, an automotive component parts manufacturer, and I am the general manager of the other company, a consulting company specialising in business process optimisation and automation in manufacturing. I love them both – the manufacturing company gives us real-world experience, and the consulting company is where I get to live out my passion for technology driven solutions for the industry.

THE MULTIPLE HURDLES IN A WOMAN'S CAREER 'RACE'

Being a wife and a mother and having a career at the same time is not without its own challenges. I once saw a meme of a racetrack with hurdles and a man and woman standing next to each other. The only hurdle the man had in his day was waking up in the morning. The woman's hurdles were waking up, kids, washing, cooking, work, finish line etcetera. Although the world is hopefully slowly moving away from that (and my husband certainly cooks), it does show some of the complexity in the career journeys of many women.

SUPPORT STRUCTURES

If I had not found the right support systems towards the end of that first year, I probably would have changed careers.

I would certainly not be where I am today if it was not for my four key support structures. Support from my family who can be there for my kids if I can't be; my husband who understands and supports my career; the partnership I have with the CEO of the company; and a work environment where there is a good team. These four structures have been key, I think any woman today who has a family and kids knows exactly what I am talking about.

IDENTIFY A MENTOR

I think having someone to look up to is also incredibly important. As women, we need to get out there, and be available and accessible so young women can see what it is possible to achieve in this industry. When I see the women in my team going through some of the things I went through, it's much easier for me to help them through it because I have already overcome it. My main advice to women is always, identify a mentor. If I hadn't found an amazing mentor early on, I think I would have thrown away the years I studied and changed careers.

WHAT IS THE POINT OF GETTING WOMEN INTO THE INDUSTRY IF WE CAN'T KEEP THEM HERE?

We need to create more awareness about what it means to be a woman in this industry and speak openly about the challenges of being a mother and having a career. Along with programmes to get women into engineering, a key focus needs to be supporting them once they are working in the industry.

I NEEDED TO LIFT MY HEAD AND THINK ABOUT STRATEGY

I believe the heart of any manufacturing business is the shop floor, and that is where my passion started to grow. So it was a big change for me when, after about 10 years in the business, I became a shareholder. It was great recognition, but my whole way of thinking had to change. I had to leave the everyday, hands-on side of my job and lift my head and think about the strategy of the business. Those building blocks I developed on the shopfloor have been key to my understanding of the business, and although I do still occasionally put on my safety boots and walk the floor, it is not something I can do every day anymore.

5 Lessons that I have learnt:

1

Choose a career that matches your personality.

2

You need mentorship early on to navigate your career path.

3

Maintaining work life balance is challenging but important.

4

We need to do more to support and retain women in engineering.

5

You need to develop big picture thinking so you can progress further.

