

How do women feature in the UK Collision Repair Sector?

Since I volunteered to write this feature for the WINs, I have realised that the women in the UK collision repair sector, though few and far between, are in fact powerful and influential individuals. Not that you will find many striding the corporate board rooms, although the Chief Executive of the Institute of the Motor Industry, whose strap line is “Proud to be Professional”, is a very dynamic lady who has guided her organisation to be a promoter of skills for all ages, all sexes and all disciplines within the automotive sector. However, for most women in the UK collision sector, their power and influence is exercised much closer to home, as part of family run shops. This can be large multisite businesses or small local community shops delivering a quality personal service.

What always amazes me about these sometime unsung women is the depth and breadth of their contribution as Owners, Accountants, Human Resource Managers, Training Managers, Shop Flow Administrators, Marketing Executives, the list is endless.

In a pool of around 4,500 shops in the UK, we have 54,000 technicians in panel, paint, fitter and vehicle damage assessment, receptionists and managers - it has been impossible to find out how many are women. However, the UK is actively encouraging young women to view collision repair as a career of choice and at Thatcham, the UK's leading Apprentice Trainer, we are now seeing a number of female entrants coming through.

Take Vicki Vicars, for example - a first year paint apprentice working in a shop in the north of England. Vicki started her career in the banking sector, having been counselled by careers advisers not to go into collision repair. However she had always had an interest in cars and was determined to realise her ambition to become a refinisher. Although Vicki has engineers in her family, her mother was not so sure about this dramatic career change!

Speaking to Vicki recently she is thoroughly enjoying her apprenticeship, coming to Thatcham 4 times a year for 2 weeks she feels she can take back practical skills to her shop. Her best advice was, “if you need help ask!” Vicki would recommend refinishing as a career for women. The point here is we need to get this message out loud and clear to all those who influence young people including teachers, careers advisers, parents and guardians. And this goes for young men as well. The complexity involved in vehicle repair means we have to have the best talent available and not be viewed as a last choice industry.

Someone who Vicki may well be inspired to emulate is Christine Maskill, owner of a 33,000 sq ft independent shop, with 50 staff including her son, repairing over a 100 cars a week.

Christine came from a research bio-chemist background with considerable experience in business management. Not only does Christine manage the day-to-day running of her shop, she is also in much demand as an industry expert by insurers and other working groups. It was interesting to compare our experiences. I have been involved in a supporting role for collision repairers for 15 years, both of us are women in a man's world, both of us quite often the only women at a meeting or conference. But both of us have never experienced any disadvantage, in fact being the lone women with a different approach to the challenges affecting our industry often means our voice is heard loud and clear. After 23 years Christine still loves the job she's in, one which is very different from that she embarked on. Sadly, she is in the minority as only 11% of managers are women.

Looking at some statistics for the UK shows only 23% of the automotive work force is female, this compares with 45% for the entire work force. More depressing it does not look to be getting better any time soon, with only 1% of modern apprentices in the motor industry taken by females. It seems girls do not associate good pay and doing interesting work with our sector. Over 40% of the motor industry's customers are female, but this is by no way reflected in the workforce.

I am sure none of these statistics come as a surprise. In fact, the more I travel to the US the more I realise how the challenges facing you are very similar to those we face in the UK. However, you are one step ahead of us, we do not have a Women's Industry Network!

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Director of Commercial Development.