

Chemical attraction

Chemical engineer Low Fong Loo enjoys a challenging and fulfilling career at ExxonMobil

by alex lim

SOME 15 years ago, a colleague told Ms Low Fong Loo (left), then a newly minted chemical engineer, that it was taboo for women to inspect processing towers when they were shut down for maintenance.

"This person said that the unit would be 'upset' if a female engineer went in," recalls Ms Low, of her experience in her previous company.

Undaunted, Ms Low and a female colleague, made company history by being the first female crew to inspect the tower, and rubbished that "taboo".

"I notice an increasing number of competent female engineering graduates are joining the engineering workforce, at least in the oil and gas industry," says Ms Low, who joined ExxonMobil, the largest independent oil company in the world, 12 years ago.

In her own words, Ms Low's chosen career in chemical engineering has "given me the opportunity to work in a company with creative people like technologists, equipment, machinery specialists and the business line folks, to create new things and influence the real world through the work that we do behind the scenes in the design and the manufacturing processes".

Ms Low, who graduated from the National University of Singapore with a chemical engineering degree, joined ExxonMobil as an operations planner.

She has since been promoted to the role of a technical manager at the company's Singapore plant, where her main roles are

to develop technical engineers and supervise and improve manufacturing competitiveness.

Notwithstanding the male-dominated perception of the industry, ExxonMobil is "committed" to promoting leadership opportunities for its women employees all over the world.

Currently, the company's male to female staff ratio is at 3:1 and 12 per cent of the company's executives like Ms Low are women, up from 9 per cent in 2000.

Ms Low, a mother of two, says: "In my



12 years in supervisory and managerial roles in ExxonMobil, there has not been any occasion when my competency has been questioned because I'm a woman."

She is doing her part to help by setting up the company's Women's Interest Network (WIN).

She says: "WIN has a mission to facilitate the professional advancement and personal development of women in ExxonMobil."

"Its focus is on professional and personal development for women; promoting networks and work-life balance for working women and mothers, as well as community outreach programmes."

Women's issues aside, Ms Low has been having a busy, challenging and fulfilling time at ExxonMobil.

After her stint as an operations planner, Ms Low served as an implementation manager for the company's various affiliates in the region.

She was then posted to Hong Kong and Shanghai, where she helped to kick-start projects, dealing with local authorities and meeting tight deadlines.

Ms Low's next two assignments were manufacturing related. She helped to ensure that the plants ran smoothly, and managed colleagues from different functions and specialities.

"Through experiences like these, I appreciated how new creative ideas can be implemented when engineering expertise and skills are applied," she says.

To better equip herself with relevant skills and qualifications, she also completed a Master in Business and Technology at Australia's University of New South Wales.

"I envisaged an integral connection between business and technology," says Ms Low.

"It was important for me to master management skills in order to take full advantage of technology which underpins every step of the manufacturing value chain, from the generation of ideas, the positioning of the organisation and adapting to market changes to deliver value to customers."

She looks forward to an exciting future with the company.

"ExxonMobil offers many careers within the same company and each assignment brings with it new things to learn and challenges to overcome," she says.

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