

Engineering really is a hole lot of fun for girls

Manufacturing might not be a sexy subject but Andrea Rodney is passionate about improving its appeal in the UK. Ruth Holmes talks to the Businesswoman of the Year

THE latest winner of the Bedfordshire Businesswoman of the Year award defies every stereotype in the book.

Andrea Rodney is the director of a precision engineering company in Leighton Buzzard which specialises in deep hole boring – and she clearly loves it.

The 37-year-old joined Hone-All 15 years ago, doing administration. Now she runs the company with her husband, Colin, the managing director, who started it in Luton nearly 30 years ago.

“I basically joined the company because my husband never came home,” she said, smiling.

Hone-All offers subcontractor services in deep hole boring, deep hole drilling, and honing, making components ranging from hip screws to parts for helicopters and Formula 1 cars.

Orders from its 2,500-strong customer base have included a replica 16th century canon for the film *Master and Commander* and a piece for a jewelled table football allegedly for David Beckham.

With no background in manufacturing, Andrea was determined from the outset to absorb every bit of knowledge she could about the factory processes to equip her to handle any technical enquiry.

“I am a big fan of learning as much as I can as quickly as I can,” she said.

This attitude evidently has helped her get ahead in what is a very male dominated field.

“Being a woman in this envi-

ronment can be frustrating, it can be very entertaining, it can be exhilarating. It depends who you’re speaking to.

“But making sure you have the knowledge and the technical expertise to back up what you are talking about gets you a lot further being female than being male because often you are not expected to know the technical processes.”

Working as a husband and wife team, she admits has its “positives and negatives”.

“We have worked it very well in that we make sure our responsibilities are very different,” she said.

“Colin focuses mainly on the technical aspects of the business and sales, while I focus on the marketing, sales strategy, admin and HR. And I do a lot of the networking.”

“It does get difficult at management meetings sometimes because we are both very passionate about what we do and about manufacturing but we often have differing opinions so you can find us fighting for airspace.”

Andrea was nominated for the Business Woman of The Year Award 2009 by Clive Haywood, a fellow from Luton University who visited the plant as a consultant, through Business Link. She was presented with the award by the president of Bedford Business Women, Jenny Tomsett, during a gala ceremony at the Sculpture Gallery, Woburn.

“I think Clive liked the fact that

not only was I open to advice but I grabbed that advice with both hands and ran with it at a million miles an hour,” said Andrea, who believes a fresh pair of eyes on any business is invaluable.

“I think the other thing that surprised Clive was how many corporate features and functions we had in place for such a small business,” she added.

“We are trying to take bigger company ethos and attitudes and implement them in a small business.”

Despite this, the 26-strong company has very much a family feel to it.

In June 2008 the firm moved to an industrial unit in Cherrycourt Way and underwent some immense changes.

But every member of staff stayed on – and had their own input into the developments.

The move brought staff together who had previously been split between the main plant in Frenches Avenue, Dunstable, where it had been since 1996, and two rented units in Houghton Regis.

The Dunstable site had reached its capacity, the lease was coming to an end on the rented building, and communication between sites was difficult.

The final blow came when a new housing development was built within 20 metres of the Dunstable plant and neighbours began to complain about the noise.

“All of these things added up and there was nothing available

in Dunstable,” said Andrea.

“Then this unit came up and it was derelict. It had a leaky roof and it was disgusting. The whole place needed a complete refurb but it was in the right location for our team and it provided us with the facilities to get everything back under one roof and everyone in the one place. It provided us with a fresh start.”

The company undertook a massive investment and improvement programme, buying the 20,000 sq ft building in November 2007 and spending six months refurbishing it before moving in, in the summer of 2008.

Six new machines were bought and every existing machine was reengineered, while other aspects of the business such as training also came under scrutiny.

“The move was such a huge project. We literally ripped the company back to basics and started again and every single person put something into it,” Angela said.

“That really inspired me because for them to be so passionate about it, not just for themselves but for the company and us, just meant the world.”

“We are a very family-run business and know each other very well. I think that’s one of the greatest strengths of the business, especially when you are going through times like we have been through the last 18 months.”

“The loyalty and commitment of the team has been just unbelievable.”

Undertaking such a massive investment project at the start of a recession had its pitfalls, not least because the company is still trying to sell the Frenches Avenue site.

But the modern new plant, with its mezzanine floor and board room overlooking the factory floor, offers a bright, airy working environment.

And, while it has suffered from the decline in cars and construction, Hone-All has managed to depend on the custom of a few large petrochemical companies and a buoyant aerospace industry.

Unlike its competitors, the firm has not had to implement short-time, despite the financial strains.

“I certainly do not regret the move, even though it has made



TOP WOMAN:
Andrea Rodney

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things more difficult in terms of financial stability,” Andrea said. “If we had stayed there I think we would have lost a large number of customers.”

For Andrea, looking forward is vital to the business success.

“If you want your business to survive these days you have got to be willing and open to new ideas,” she said.

“You have got to be willing to challenge the norm and the expected and to be permanently assessing, improving and changing.”

“It is the innovating, the motivating and inspiring that gets you ahead. The minute you actually stand still you are a year behind within a couple of months.”

And this forward thinking doesn’t just stop in her own business. She is a member of numerous bodies aiming to effect change in manufacturing in this country – and she’s not afraid to be outspoken.

As well as working with EEDA on the manufacturing strategy she sits on the regional advisory group of the national skills academy for manufacturing, is chair of the EEF regional council and a member of the education and training committee for the Manufacturing Technologies Association (MTA).

“All these groups effectively feed into government in one way or another about what training courses we need, how to attract youth to the industry, how we can change the image of manufacturing from its dark and dirty days and let people know there is a future to be had.

“It’s about getting the government to recognise the value of manufacturing in the UK and how good we are at it. Some of the best engineering is still done in the UK and I love that. But we do need government help and support.”

