

In conversation with...

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Founded in 1931, FUCHS is today's largest independent lubricants manufacturer. What does this mean geographically and statistically and what do you believe is at the core of the company's continued success?

This means that FUCHS is present on all continents, with 62 companies worldwide. This is a major advantage for customer proximity; with R&D hubs and laboratories in 22 countries, we can react fast to local and regional customer demands, supported by suitable technology; our 10,000 formulations offer a full range of lubricants serving almost all applications. Key to our global presence and success is combining tradition with new trends, eg, digitalisation, mobility, globalisation, and seeing these not as threats, but as challenges and opportunities.

You began working at FUCHS in 2011 - How has your role developed since then?

I started to work for the FUCHS-Group in the role of Head of Global R&D with the target to build and develop the global network within R&D to generate the knowledge workflow with the experts to reduce redundancies, and increase the effectiveness and efficiency of our technical activities. Additionally at the end of 2012, I took over the responsibility of the R&D department of FUCHS Schmierstoffe which is the largest FUCHS affiliate and for the next 5 years I experienced an interesting and challenging combination of a strategic function and an operational approach.

In 2018 I returned to the Holding as VP Global R&D. The global task is now more dominant than ever having network structures in place and aiming for global targets. My focus is more intense coordination and further optimisation and cross-linking with the other global functions that are required.

Can you share an insight into a typical week in your life as VP of Global R&D?

Pre-Coronavirus I travelled extensively to our R&D facilities, spending time engaging with international colleagues, staying informed on relevant local issues, successes and difficulties. Since Coronavirus, I have learned to manage all the tasks virtually, keeping contact and communication alive from my home or work office (which can make for long days given the different time zones). Digitalisation is now more important than ever and I'm happy that we were prepared to cope with this situation.

Nevertheless I look forward to a future where I can combine face-to-face contact with virtual 'journeys'. I really miss the 3rd dimension and the emotions in the digital environment.

As a woman in one of the most influential and senior roles in a traditionally male dominated sector, do you feel a sense of personal responsibility to champion diversity within the industry?

I have always been a promoter and big supporter of diversity; only with diversity can you achieve the best results, combining the different capabilities of females and males which complement, rather than compete with each other. This is valid for each management level. Personally, I have never tried to be better than a man, I am always striving to be the best woman I can be.

What more do you believe the industry can do to address this issue?

I really think that over the years, some things have started to change but the steps forward are very small. A significant mindset change is needed to successfully address this issue. Promoting women to senior roles must be a natural act, not an exception. Be fair.

In a previous interview with Lube magazine in 2018, you spoke about the 4 major trends and challenges facing the industry: sustainability, digitalisation and big data, 3D printing and e-mobility – are these still the key issues? How is this progressing?

Yes they are, and all are progressing fast. FUCHS, as a company, has taken them all on and is aiming to address them satisfactorily.

In terms of sustainability, since 2020 we are Gate-to-Gate CO₂ neutral and are targeting cradle-to-gate CO₂ neutrality within the next years. Further we are engaging in proactive activities: I have been newly appointed as chair of the UEIL Sustainability Committee where I really hope we can spread understanding regarding sustainability within the lubricants industry. We will be looking to define standards on how to measure sustainability within the sector and the entire supply chain.

Digitalisation and Big Data are a big topic, especially in the R&D environment, where we have further developed our capabilities by applying DoE and simulation models in our projects.

For E-mobility approaches we have established a dedicated R&D department which works as a matrix globally having involved researchers from all regions so that we can develop according to the requirements. Here we consider product lines like Driveline-Fluids, Thermo-fluids and greases.

What are the most significant challenges facing today's R&D scientists and engineers? With so much variation across the global regulatory landscape should we be lobbying for greater harmonisation?

A clear yes, the harmonisation of the chemical legislation was the initial aim, but the result is different and diverse. And a further challenge for scientists is the global availability of the raw materials, especially when we develop products for global use.

How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected FUCHS? Did you adapt your practices, internal machinations? And what do you believe will be the global ramifications for our industry?

I think we've experienced the pandemic like each and every other company and we have had to adapt both as individuals and as a company. Being spread over the globe we faced the effects at different times, at the beginning in Asia, then Europe, and the Americas.... We applied stringent hygienic rules, social distancing, staggered shifts, wearing masks and home office activities, having the good fortune of being well equipped and digitalised.

The learnings might be (not only for our business), that we have strong one directional dependencies in the supply chains, and perhaps regional availabilities might be the safer and more sustainable approach.

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