

Karen Silk: Capital International Staffing

By Suhail Mirza, City Editor

Karen Silk is CEO at Capital International Staffing, which specialises in engineering recruitment throughout the UK and Europe. Based in Burgess Hill in Sussex, it has been established for over 30 years and specialises in the aerospace, automotive, defence, and telecoms sectors. The business employs 20 people and has a turnover of £7m.

Passion (for business and life) is a word that always comes to mind when I share time with Silk. Anyone who was present at the Recruitment International Gender Diversity in Recruitment Conference in 2014 will recall her inspirational address; “I am deeply committed to encouraging young people, and especially girls, who have an aptitude and interest in physics and mathematics at GCSE to consider a career in engineering. The UK is facing a critical shortage of engineers and this will impact our ability to compete in the global market.”

2014 was also the year that Silk became a member of the APSCO Representative Committee. Her experience within engineering recruitment (and prior to that in the highly technical world of scientific instruments) has contributed to Capital becoming such a well-respected brand with global businesses in its key verticals.

It seems a long way from Silk’s country roots, although her formative years laid the seeds of her entrepreneurial spirit.

“We have also ensured our staff find Capital to be a fun and supportive place to work and I am proud that we have many that have been with us for many years.”

She says, “I grew up in Cambridge and my parents were commercial farmers. My family had roots in farming going back to 1824. I remain a country girl at heart and have had a lifelong affinity to it. Hard work and drive were built into me from childhood and I recall waking at dawn and driving tractors at aged 13! With my family role models, I guess I simply assumed that I would eventually end up working for myself.”

Armed with this strong work ethic, Silk completed a one-year business course (at Angela Ruskin University) after her A-levels and as part of the course she made a presentation to a local Cambridge business’ HR director and was invited to join them. The business specialised in the manufacturing of spectrophotometry and gas chromatography equipment and was eventually acquired by Phillips. Silk flourished during her nearly seven years there:

“I thrived in the world of business and was given experience across all the parts of the business. This included the sales function, where I specialised in the East European and Russian markets. I worked closely with research and was then given a senior role in finance. I also sat on the executive committee (with responsibility for all of Europe), which instilled the critical importance of financial control. Phillips’ world class training enabled me to have the all-round experience to run my own business!”

Her opportunity to do this came, as it so often does, in a rather unexpected way. It was late 1984 and by then Silk had met her husband (Graham) while he was working for another division of Phillips as a software engineer. He had decided to leave full-time employment in order to become a contractor.

She recalls, “Graham used an agency to secure the contracting role. Later he found out there were a couple of temp roles required at a client and after talking to a couple of contractors, he obtained their CVs. As a result of this, Capital Staffing was born! I bought a typewriter, some stationary for the company and over the weekend re-typed the CVs’. On Monday our first placements were made!”

At first, Silk juggled working full-time in her role at Phillips with the demands of placing contractors through Capital, but then she took the plunge and knew she had found the perfect vehicle to allow that family entrepreneurial spirit to flourish.

“I absolutely love recruitment where each day brings different challenges and given it is absolutely predicated developing

personal relationships, it is vital - for long term success - to put your values, including your integrity, compassion and honour at the centre of your business.”

Capital enjoyed sustained growth as it followed its clients’ needs across the UK and mainland Europe. Husband Graham later joined the business full-time (in 1997) and at its height, Capital had a turnover in excess of £15m and 45 staff. Creating an environment that fostered technical expertise and which allowed staff to develop a balance between work and personal life was and remains a critical element to Capital’s success.

Silk comments, “We took the conscious decision to be specialists rather than generalists and I remain passionate about our niche markets in defence, aerospace, automotive and telecommunications. We have also ensured our staff find Capital to be a fun and supportive place to work and I am proud that we have many that have been with us for many years. Two of my senior consultants, for example, have been with us 18 and 12 years respectively. This gives confidence to clients and also engenders deep expertise within our business.”

It is a point supported by academic research. In his 2002 book *Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances*, Harvard psychology professor, Richard Hackman, highlights that business team performance tends to be enhanced as shared tenure increases. Furthermore, stable teams develop what psychologist, Dan Wegner, calls “transactive memory” i.e. over time, team members understand the knowledge embedded amongst the team and recognise core strengths and weaknesses.

Silk’s journey has, however, not been without its vicissitudes, both personal and business related.

Clearly, the 2008 global financial crisis was one that profoundly impacted Capital:

“We had survived several recessions prior to 2008 but I think virtually all across recruitment this was by far the most pervasive. Yes, it hit our numbers but we survived and fell back on the strength of our expertise and longevity of our client relationships. The last 30 years have taught us that recruitment is a two-way street and we have to find roles that ignite the passion of our candidates and match them with organisations competing for the very best talent to realise their corporate goals. You have to serve both constituencies with integrity and in today’s transparent world, values matter.”

As stated earlier, 2014 was a great year for Silk. Her memorable



address at the Gender Diversity conference and election to the APSCo committee were external recognition of the contribution she has made to the world of recruitment and the business sectors Capital serves.

Unfortunately, in 2015 Silk faced profound personal tragedy. Shockingly both her mother and sister (the latter completely unexpectedly) passed away within seven days of each other.

“It has taken a year to ‘recover’ from this and inevitably the business did suffer as I questioned whether I could come back from this deeply painful episode.”

She is now back at the helm of the business and her verve and spirit was evident when we met at the Institute of Directors in April. Happily, the business is now thriving and growing and Silk confirms, “I am confident about the future. Our brand and team is excellent and I feel privileged to help the UK and Europe meet its need for technical staff across strategically vital industry sectors.”

Outside the world of business, Silk retains her lifelong love for horses and country pursuits and enjoys show jumping and dressage. She and husband Graham are proud parents of their 20-year-old daughter and 17-year-old son.