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Opening Doors

Women in Aerospace (WIA) celebrates its 25th anniversary this month and its sister organization, Women in Aerospace Europe, its first anniversary. But despite the 24-year age difference, the two organizations share the same goals.

On both sides of the Atlantic, aerospace companies and agencies are worried about replacing the baby boom generation that is nearing retirement and whose engineering ranks swelled in the 1970s with Apollo-era excitement about space development. In addition to luring engineering students from China, India and South Korea, U.S. and European aerospace industry leaders have said encouraging women to consider engineering careers is a key goal for preserving their industrial bases in addition to ensuring work force diversity.

Doing that is a challenge for Americans and Europeans alike. But WIA Europe has to deal with cultural issues that Americans

are largely spared. Example: In southern Europe, it is customary for women to offer light kisses on the cheek as a greeting to friends and colleagues they have not seen for even just a couple of days. Doing so has grown into an art form over the decades, with multiple regional variations.

Now imagine applying that social nicety if you are a woman who has just returned from a business trip and you arrive at the office as the lone female with 10 male colleagues.

"That may seem like a small thing, but making the aerospace workplace environment comfortable for women who are often in a small minority is not a small thing," says WIA Europe Chairwoman Claudia Kessler, who is chief executive of HE Space Holding BV of the Netherlands.

Kessler discussed WIA Europe's goals with *Space News* staff writer Peter B. de Selding.

What is your current membership?

We have 70 members now, more than double from a year ago, and we expect to surpass 100 by midyear and then reach 200 in 2011. There are about 5,000 women working in the aerospace sector in Europe, whether it's on the industry side or the government agency side.

Does your organization promote the idea of quotas for women at aerospace companies and agencies?

I hate the idea of quotas, but sometimes it seems like the only way to get things moving, and to make sure that women are not stuck in dead-end positions, or in purely technical jobs where advancement is not possible. A quota could accelerate things at the middle-management level, where there are qualified female candidates who are being passed over. There are lots of arguments against quotas, too, so it's a difficult question.

What are some examples of issues that you view as particularly relevant to women and that your organization can address?

To promote access of women to management posts, you have to start with issues related to the family. Here I am thinking of making part-time jobs available, of making sure that child care is feasible for a working woman, and to facilitate finding schools for children of women moving from one job to another. Having a child care facility on site is not always feasible, but there are efforts that can make the search for child care less of a problem.

As you see it, is the problem that women are denied career paths because a lack of school or child care facilities prevents them from fully dedicating themselves to work, or because



WOMEN IN AEROSPACE EUROPE PHOTO

able, or just a lack of experience in working with women. Whatever the reasons are, women sometimes need to switch from company to company more often than men in order to find a career development path and not get stuck.

Your organization follows in the footsteps of Women in Aerospace in the United States. Is there a difference between the United States and Europe with respect to women's professional advancement opportunities?

I wouldn't say the differences are huge, but it is still harder for a woman to make a career in Europe than it is in the United States, in industry and in government.

WIA Europe says one of its goals is to advocate further space-sector investment by governments. How do you approach that?

It is among our goals. The space sector is viewed very much as a male domain. If we can show that it also has strong support from women, its image may improve with the general public and that may make it easier to win government support. It is true that the organization was founded by women active in the space sector — Simonetta di Pippo and myself — and that we would like to see more support in Europe for the industry.

Simonetta di Pippo is director of human spaceflight at ESA, and is one of two female directors at the 18-nation agency, the other being Magali Vaissiere, director of telecommunications. Is ESA viewed as exemplary in terms of equal opportunity?

The figures we have been given show that two ESA directors out of 10 are women. As

of 2009, ESA had 339 women in its A-level work force, or 18 percent of the total. That compares with 12 percent in 2003. I believe that of the total ESA work force, some 13 percent are women. There has never been a female director-general at ESA.

The agency has undertaken some diversification efforts, and things are moving there. Of course, we would like to see more.

Is ESA constrained by the fact that it must meet quotas — at least, informal ones — in hiring from each of its member states? In the past, the agency has complained it could not find enough of certain nationalities willing to work there.

That is true. ESA already has that to think about. I think part of the reason that the agency's A-level work force has more women now is because of greater numbers of women coming from France, Italy and Spain. These national agencies provide more women as candidates to ESA now than they did before. At the same time, for reasons that I am still not sure I understand, it remains difficult for ESA to hire Germans — men or women — because going to ESA is not always considered as a way of advancing your career in Germany.

You are chief executive of HE Space Holding, with offices in Bremen, Germany, and near ESA's European Space Research and Technology Centre in Noordwijk, Netherlands. How is your business doing?

We reported revenue of about 10 million euros (\$13.5 million) in 2009, and we are growing at 10 percent per year. Our role is to provide specialist engineers — experts in satellite payloads, propulsion and so forth — to companies and agencies.

they are suffering discrimination as women?

It's both. I think in general, men and women have the same goals. But it's also true that men are often more comfortable with men in certain work situations, and tend to favor men when granting promotions.

Women are still a fairly small minority in the aerospace sector. Are you focusing on education as well, to encourage women in science and engineering?

Yes we are, and those efforts are already underway, with efforts to increase the number of girls in science classes. In fact, we don't want to create anything new in that regard. What WIA Europe intends is to show role models to girls and young women. So we go to schools and universities to show what is possible, and to offer a support network.

What has been the response of government and industry since WIA Europe was formed?

There has been a positive response generally, and specifically a positive response at ESA [the European Space Agency] and at DLR, the German Aerospace Center. These organizations do support it. EADS also has said one of its top corporate goals is to strengthen diversity and especially to increase the presence of women on all levels. The problem in general is not the lack of support at the top-management level for equality in the workplace. The problems are usually found in middle management.

Have you heard of or witnessed examples of obvious discrimination?

Those examples certainly exist, unfortunately. Again, it's at the middle-management level. Some men are afraid of promoting women to middle management. There could be lots of reasons — worries that she will start a family and be less avail-