

Author



Clare Spittle

Despite having an HGV1 licence, Kirsten Tisdale says she wouldn't make a truck driver because she's not up to the loading and unloading requirements

The Minority Report

In a profession dominated by men, Clare Bottle, working with Transport for London and Kirsten Tisdale CMLT, Logistics Consultant, Aricia, explain why they enjoy being part of the 9% of women employees working in logistics and transport. Clare Spittle finds out what drives them.

Why did you choose a career in logistics?

CB: My first job after university was as a secretary in a transport company. I'm a curious person by nature, so I usually asked the bosses to explain the documents I had to type. The more I learned, the more hooked I became, so after a couple of years I applied to join a graduate training programme and got into management.

KT: I didn't deliberately choose a career in logistics, or 'physical distribution' as it was then called; I chose a career in management. I left university with little sense of direction initially. My conversation with the careers advisor had consisted of me asking if he thought there were any careers that would make use of my mathematics degree and that I wouldn't find boring. The reply, which was a genuine attempt to help me and which I valued for its honesty, was 'Not really!' But two years of management in a non-career role left me much more decided: I wanted a good management training scheme and a commitment to giving me early responsibility, including my own profit centre.

What attracted you to the sector?

CB: The supply-chains of the UK manufacturing, construction, waste and retail organisations are constantly changing. There are conflicting regulatory, economic and technological pressures that have to be managed by selecting the best places to store things and routes/methods for delivering them. There's no time for the rarefied atmosphere of academia, because

logistics solutions have to be pragmatic and workable. When logistics works, you don't notice it; but when it goes wrong, there's all hell to pay. I love that challenge and I'd never want to work in any other industry.

KT: Having said that I chose management rather than logistics, it is not true that management in any sector would have appealed to me. I wanted to work in a 'real' industry with a future. Many of Britain's manufacturing industries were in decline, and so logistics fitted the bill. Despite frequent enquiries about what a nice girl like me was doing in trucking, I wasn't put off by its virtually all-male culture. I had taken my degree at Imperial College when it was almost entirely engineering, science and mining, and was used to an environment with a ratio of 13:1; and anyway, after the six months or so that I spent as a volunteer in a down-and-out centre in my gap year, truck drivers and warehousemen seemed like mere pussycats!

Why do you think there are more men than women working in logistics?

CB: It's a vicious circle, fuelled by the narrow way in which logistics jobs are advertised. Women don't read the trade press because they aren't in the industry, so they don't see the logistics job adverts. Recruiters get more applications from men and see existing jobs filled by men, so they continue the status quo. If things are to change, there needs to be a paradigm shift in the expectations of recruiters and their potential >>



Clare Bottle loves working in transport and logistics: 'When logistics works, you don't notice it; but when it goes wrong, there's all hell to pay. I love that challenge and I'd never want to work in any other industry.'



Kirsten Tisdale found her way into the sector through management. She loves the urgency of working in logistics, but has an important criticism to make: 'The sector has also tended to have a long hours culture, often as part of a low-margin vicious circle. Breaking that would be good for everyone, men and women.'

employees. I hope that the growth of online jobseeker services might open the market, but I'd also like to see a sustained, active marketing drive to highlight the sector to women and girls.

KT: I think that there are more men in the sector because traditionally people have tended to work their way up and, even today, it can be a rough, tough job at the action end. I couldn't have worked my way up from the bottom; despite having an HGVI, I wouldn't make a truck driver because I'm not up to the loading and unloading requirements. Opening the curtains on a truck is quite a physically demanding job, as is unloading roll cages. Yes, roll cages may have wheels, but getting the recalcitrant ones moving is no easy matter; and stopping the well-maintained ones can be even harder! The sector has also tended to have a long hours culture, often as part of a low-margin vicious circle. Breaking that would be good for everyone, men and women.

Are there any benefits to being a woman in the industry?

CB: Women in logistics tend to make an impression, because there are so few of us that we stand out, so it can be a useful way to get recognition. Also, at logistics events, there's never a queue in the ladies!

KT: The biggest benefit of being a woman in logistics is that everyone remembers you. However, that's a double-edged sword, as you have to remember who they are as well! I think that another benefit is that women can sometimes be better at managing a largely male workforce in a less confrontational way. I have certainly never felt there were any disadvantages. I've always felt valued by my seniors and staff. You can detect what someone really feels about you in how they introduce you to others. However curmudgeonly a driver is in the yard, when he introduces you to 'his' stores in the way that a proud father would introduce star offspring, you know you're not doing too badly. Similarly, bosses have always introduced me as a valued member of their senior team.

What do you think could be done to recruit more women?

CB: The public doesn't know many logistics role models, but the few they do see tend to be men – for example, Eddie Stobart. I'd like to see more public recognition of the logistics sector and especially of women like Hilary Devey MILT, Anne Preston and Pauline Edwards.

KT: I'm not sure that I agree that more women should be positively recruited, because I'm not sure it helps to regard categories of people differently. I've always aimed to be a person that just happens to be female. What I do strongly believe is that no hurdle should be put in front of anyone that doesn't apply equally to everyone, and good management training should be given to all, regardless of whether they came into management as part of a graduate intake scheme or from the shop floor.

Is there any advice you would give to any women considering a career in logistics?

CB: I would offer nothing but encouragement. I would also point out that there's a wide range of jobs available within the sector.

KT: Know yourself, play to your strengths and focus on improving those weaker areas. The key skills to succeed in logistics are many and varied, and you really do have to be an all-rounder. You need to:

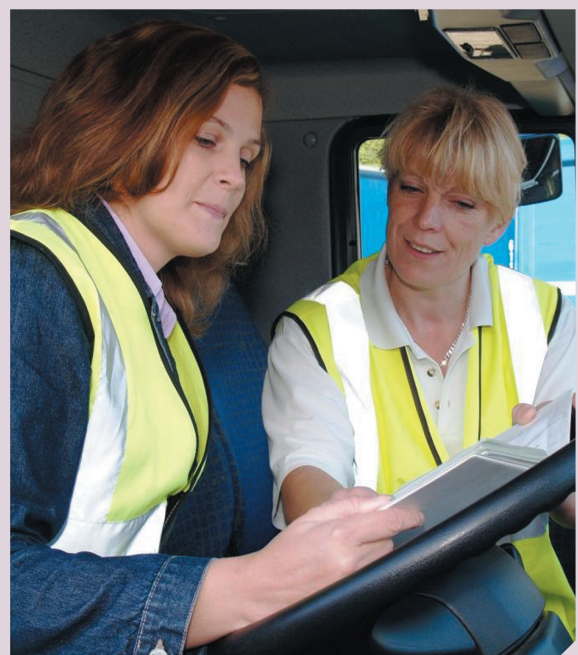
- Be commercially astute, but with an empathy for customers, suppliers and other team members
- Command and give respect in equal measure
- Be able to see the big picture, but with an eye for the detail
- Be committed to planning and process, but with a pragmatic approach to the unplanned

Last, but not least, you need to combine a sense of urgency with an ability to laugh: when the going gets tough, the tough get going!

At the sharp end of logistics and passenger transport women are also making their mark. Not long after passing her Large Goods Vehicle (LGV) driving test through the Women into Logistics scheme, Brenda Anderson secured full-time employment with Scottish haulage experts Wishart International. She regularly drives 18t rigid vehicles, delivering loads to varying locations in Scotland, including Blairgowrie and Aberdeen.

The Women into Logistics initiative is run by Instep Commercial, the training arm of the Dundee and Tayside Chamber of Commerce and Industry to address the gender imbalance in the logistics sector; women only account for 9% of the workforce in the freight transport by road sector.

Brenda Anderson comments: 'On the day I started at Wishart International I was slightly nervous, but that's only to be expected when starting any new job. I'm the only female driver there and so I suppose that did make it a little more daunting. Everyone was welcoming and friendly, so any worries that I had about fitting in to a male-dominated environment were soon dispelled. Settling in was made easier by the fact that I am just treated as one of the boys and don't receive any preferential treatment. The other drivers have been really good, helping me to learn the different routes and I've definitely benefited from their experience.'



About the author

Clare Spittle is studying for a degree in journalism at Northampton University. She is particularly interested in women's roles in passenger transport and logistics, as she is the daughter of the Institute's well-known Vice-President Jim Spittle FCILT and says she was brought up immersed in our sector.

Information

For more information on women's issues in transport and logistics, why not join the Women's Transport Network? Follow this link to the WTN area of the Institute's web site: www.ciltuk.org.uk/wtn

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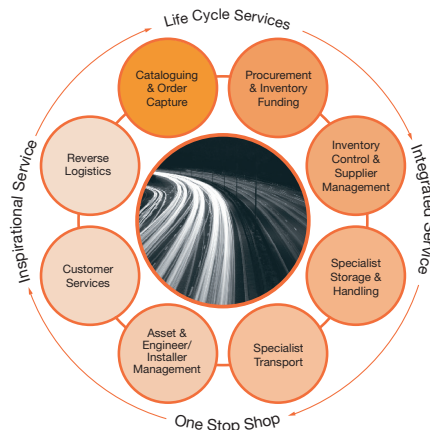
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