



Inspirational

Women in Telecoms

By Melissa Cogavin, Managing Editor, SCTE

To mark International Women's Day, which took place in March, and as part of our broader mission to encourage diversity in the telecoms sector, for the second year Broadband Journal talked to three women whom we felt worthy of recognition. Fiorenza Mella, Maria Tyrrell and Dr Gillian Kendrick talked to Broadband Journal about their achievements, how they got started in this sector and what motivates them now.



Fiorenza Mella

Xpresso Communications

Fiorenza Mella is an applied linguist with a passion for technology, data science and arts. She is an international communications and content strategist, marketing

and PR specialist with commercial skills and intercultural competences. Based in The Netherlands, with over 25 years' management, business development, marketing and communications in electronics, broadcast, media and related markets, Fiorenza is the strategic mind behind the expansion of various businesses and the originator of several successful international branding campaigns as well as the creative voice of numerous social media accounts.

Following a career as managing director of several companies, in 2012 she founded Xpresso Communications aiming at "humanising" communications in technology-driven markets. Xpresso Communications is headquartered in The Netherlands with home offices in London, Paris, Cologne, Rome, Bucharest and New York. She is a fluent speaker of English, French, Italian, Spanish and Dutch. Fiorenza has an M.A. with Summa Cum Laude in English/Applied Linguistics, as well as a B.A. in communication sciences.

What first attracted you to the telecoms/broadband industry and how did you get into this business?

Fiorenza: A few years ago, with a degree in Communications Sciences and Foreign Languages and an MA in Applied Linguistics and a certain faith in serendipity, I let opportunity present itself to me, and it soon did. A friend of mine asked me to help translate a technical manual highlighting a DVE, a hardware-based product generating special 3D effects and animation for the broadcast industry. That was an entirely unknown domain to me as an avid but largely traditional lover of literature – technical translation was well outside of my wheelhouse. Excited by the challenge but anxious that it might be a realm entirely outside of my cognitive capability, I asked if it would be possible to see, feel and touch the technology I was supposed to write about.

I entered a demo room surrounded by LEDs and I think I probably felt like an astronaut sitting in a real shuttle for the first time, after finishing their theoretical studies and simulations. I fell in love with the unknown. That was the start of my career in broadcast technology. I was given three months to learn how to use three systems (a DVE, a character generator and an editing system) and to be able to give a demo for each of them. Not yet fully aware of what I was getting myself into, I had to place a bet on myself – a bet that I had the determination, drive and aptitude to make it work. It was a bet I won. Helped immensely by a friend who gave me a crash-course in the basics of engineering, I was



soon repairing hardware, installing it and training on it. I'd been bitten by the bug; technology was in my veins.

What, if any, mentors helped you along the way?

I've had a few mentors. One of them - David Hughes, a brilliant engineer and passionate individual - was fundamental in increasing my technical knowledge and offering me a job at Dynatech, an American company with European Headquarters in The Netherlands.

I moved to The Netherlands, a place far more meritocratic for women in tech compared to Italy back then. David's support was crucial when I started working at a global level with different technology requirements and cultures. Here, I really gained the opportunity to start introducing my instinctive, theoretical and practical knowledge of language into the world of technology (or technology into my world of language perhaps: the crux of the fusion remains for me - deliberately, I think - indistinct). My job involved a lot of experimenting, innovating, and constantly learning. I would travel with heavy flight cases (back then we were moving around big boxes and cables - the software solutions of today were but a dream), proceed with installation and then engage in the part where my real strength lay: demonstration and training.

What have you learned along the way as a woman in a male-dominated environment?

I always experienced it as an advantage, but arguably that's because I made a deliberate effort to try and construct things that way - a task that wasn't always easy, and means I certainly understand those who have had more challenging experiences in their own journeys. My experiences of discrimination were never overt, but I certainly always felt a pressure to outperform my male peers just to be held as an equal - which may be far more about my conditioning than the actions of the people I actually interacted with.

When I moved into a commercial role, I think the general feeling of curiosity that was held towards me - a petite Italian woman who understood engineers' needs and spoke the same tech language being something of a novelty at that point - actually served as a benefit; it drew people in and served as an ice-breaker and form of connection.

That was back then, when sales were very much about physical products and demo units, and I was regularly closing big deals at shows like NAB and IBC. These days, I've segued into

marketing and communications, and the industry has hugely changed in what and how it sells: that form of connection with clients no longer comes from the novelty of being a woman, but from years of industry experience instead.

What are the main challenges for women in this industry?

I would say that the main challenge is to become one of those women in this industry: to break in in the first place - to get to know this industry and follow an educational path that matches the increasing needs for technical staff across the board.

Broadcast used to be a niche space for audio-visual solutions. Nowadays it's a big container that includes several domains and is connected with other technology fields such as broadband and telecoms, to name just two of the biggest. All these industries have shifted to cloud and software-based solutions, bringing an increasing connection with IT and software, and meaning that those entering the field need - somewhat paradoxically - a wider, broader and more holistic understanding than ever, but also, a more niche area of specialisation. As with almost any industry, education and an appetite for new knowledge are going to be the crucial points of differentiation in a competitive employment market. But women also shouldn't undervalue the soft skills they can bring to areas such as communication and management. These skills matter.

What would improve opportunities and prospects for women looking for a career in telecoms?

My suggested advice stands for both women and men together: education, passion, and flexibility. Being involved in technology requires constant learning, experimentation and change. Individuals will improve their own prospects when they foster these values, meaning being open-minded as to how experiences of all types might contribute to their growth.

From an industry side though, we can encourage this through improved access to post-graduate (and indeed, even university level) mentoring. And again, for both sexes (and none), creating a work environment and culture that is genuinely respectful of work/life balance.

What are you most proud of in your work?

Technologically, I am proud of one challenging project that called upon me to develop a new solution which allowed the shooting of an animation TV series with a simultaneous double chroma-

key setting. It was an innovation that enabled the production company (Back then I was the Managing Director of Toonder Studios) to carry out 100-day production in a more efficient and less costly way by reducing both acting and editing time.

But on a broader industry level, the creation of my own business has been a huge personal achievement, not just because it has been successful, but because it proved to me that my values do have a place in this industry: human connection, openness and collaboration, a non-hierarchical organisational structure and truly flexible, remote working conditions that value talent and output, not hours behind a desk.

What do you see the future looking like for women in this sector in 10 years' time?

I am truly positive about the increasing presence of women in this technology-driven sector – both because there are better opportunities than ever in software development and engineering, but also because as the industry broadens and diversifies, there is a more diverse range of skills and attributes that will carry value. With any luck, more flexible working conditions and improved educational tracks into the industry will combine to not only bring a new, younger generation to the industry, but to also encourage back those who have left because the industry previously wasn't able to accommodate their needs.

The statistics seem to support the overall positive trend for women in the industry. On the software side, there are over 195,349 software programmers currently employed in the United States: of which 28.7% are women, while 71.3% are men. Whilst that's by no means parity yet, it is significantly better than it was just a few years ago, and better than many other comparable industries. And the growth of remote work as the 'new normal' seems likely to improve that number in the future; in the UK, female engineers in general (not software-specific) increased from 13% to 14.5% in 2022, and in the USA, the growth seen was from 13% to 17% between 2019 and 2021.

Where will we see you in 5 years' time?

I will be still communicating (with Xpresso Communications) and learning about technology while devoting more time to tech start-up consultancy - a side-project that indulges my love of innovation. I recently started studying data science out of curiosity but also with a view to future business deployment: I'm as fascinated by the unknown as by any future-ready plan – so

just as serendipity guided my entrance into the industry, I'll allow it to keep guiding my path forward now.



Maria Tyrrell
Technetix

Maria Tyrrell joined Technetix in 2015 as Head of Marketing and was promoted to Group Marketing Director in 2017. After studying business and marketing in London, she started her marketing career at Price Waterhouse (now Price Waterhouse Coopers) while also studying for her post-graduate diploma for the Chartered Institute of Marketing. She then worked in the corporate client division of a major insurance company setting up their market intelligence unit. A short career break followed – two years and two daughters later, Maria returned to her career in professional services marketing. Apart from a short spell working for an international medical device company, Technetix was her first marketing role with an organisation that invented products and solutions.

What first attracted you to the telecoms/broadband industry and how did you get into this business?

I was approached about the Head of Marketing role at Technetix and (if I am being completely honest) I came along for the interview out of curiosity. My first experience of Technetix was so positive and warm, that I had no hesitation in accepting the role when I was offered it. I met with the HR adviser and the chief commercial officer for the initial interview and then spent time with the person that I would be replacing. My first meeting was for 2.5 hours and I was impressed that I was given the opportunity to meet with their current head of marketing and ask her anything I liked! I knew as I was driving home that I would accept the role if it was offered.

The group marketing director role is challenging but is also incredibly exciting due to the sheer scope of projects that I get involved in everything from writing awards submissions, through to working with our designer on our exhibition stands. The feeling I get when I arrive at ANGA and see the stand is second to none!

The broadband industry is full of talented individuals and Technetix is no exception. Many of our team are multilingual,

graduates/postgraduates and/or outstanding experts in their field – many are all 3! The common factor is that everyone is a team player – no matter where they are located or what they do. A positive that came out of the pandemic was the routine use of Teams as a communications tool across all locations.

What, if any, mentors helped you along the way?

There are many people at Technetix and in the industry that have helped me along the way. If I had to pick one person who always has time for people – particularly those that want to learn, it would be Walter Dumon, sales engineering director. He is passionate about our products and what he does and loves sharing his knowledge. Walter was so welcoming when I joined Technetix and always makes time for people. I particularly appreciate his knowledge of fine wines – which we will be serving at stand C30 at ANGA this year.

What have you learned along the way as a woman in a male-dominated environment?

I can honestly say that it has not been a factor for me but then the marketing team is dominated by women!

Women are traditionally a minority in STEM careers, although 30% of Technetix employees are women, a percentage which is also reflected at a senior management level and we have a number of outstanding female engineers in our team.

What are the main challenges for women in this industry?

Historically there has been a perception (stereotype) that women are disinterested in a career in technology or engineering and this tended to self-perpetuate. I think working to eliminate gender biases from a young age is crucial for all employment sectors.

A 2022 joint NAMIC and WICT diversity employment study showed that female representation increased by 5% since 2019, even as women were significantly more impacted by the pandemic in terms of employment.

I think the main challenge for women in this industry is maintaining a work/life balance. It is still largely the case that, where applicable, a woman fulfils the role of primary carer and this can be challenging when working to a tight deadline or having to travel as a part of your role.

What would improve opportunities and prospects for women looking for a career in telecoms?

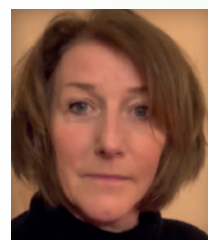
Flexible working practices, term-time only contracts, remote working and greater use of technology for international meetings.

What are you most proud of in your work?

The answer to that one is easy – the marketing team! You are only ever as good as the people you work with and I am lucky enough to work with some incredibly talented people. We support each other and most importantly there is mutual trust and respect.

What do you see the future looking like for women in this sector in 10 years' time?

I sincerely hope that in 10 years' time there is parity for women in the broadband communications sector for all measures and that the gender divide is no longer a significant talking point!



Dr Gillian Kendrick **Real World Systems**

Dr Gillian Kendrick is the CEO of Realworld UK. Realworld work with telecoms operators in the UK and the rest of the world, providing services to implement inventory solutions and integrate these in to their OSS and BSS. Gillian has recently worked with the Irish regulator, Comreg, to provide a technical feasibility study for their Physical Access Register Market Review, and has also been a participant in the International Standards body – the Open GIS Consortium. Gillian moved into IT after gaining her doctorate in theoretical physics.

What first attracted you to the telecoms/broadband industry and how did you get into this business?

I had been working in the GIS software industry providing solutions to manage inventory for utility companies when I first started working with the telecoms industry. I soon realised that things run at a fast pace in telecoms and that it is an industry where there are many complex and challenging requirements. Who could resist?!



What, if any, mentors helped you along the way?

I have worked with a number of different commercial operational and technical experts over the years who have been very generous with their knowledge.

What have you learned along the way as a woman in a male-dominated environment?

Be confident in your abilities and ensure that your contribution and voice are heard. I learned these lessons early on, having grown up with two elder brothers.

What are the main challenges for women in this industry?

The telecoms industry is a fast moving one which in some ways makes it more open to change, new ideas, new solutions no matter who they come from. The challenge is to ensure that you keep listening, learning and being seen to be part of the solution.

What would improve opportunities and prospects for women looking for a career in telecoms?

You don't have to have a STEM background to work in telecoms. There are many opportunities in sales, marketing, management, accounting as well as engineering, operations and strategic planning. It's easy to find formal and informal training which can help provide more background on the industry. So keep learning.

What are you most proud of in your work?

Helping to build a team which provides solutions which bring real benefits to telecoms businesses, which also benefit the community, and also a team that has fun doing it.

What do you see the future looking like for women in this sector in 10 years' time?

The door is open for women to join the sector. Every business is keen to bring in new resources of which there is currently a shortage.

Where will we see you in 5 years' time?

Developing new opportunities for staff in the company, building more products to bring quick benefits to this business as it evolves, and working with telcos around the world, helping to deliver more solutions.

