

A Career for Her in Industrial Distribution

By Ginger Wheeler

When girls and young women plan their future, it's a pretty safe bet that industrial distribution is not on their radar as a career path. Industrial distribution is the career field that functions as the go-between for manufacturers of any type of product (and often services) and the companies who need them. Some industrial distributors specialize in specific areas like electrical products or heating/cooling supplies or power transmission/motion control components (think bearings, motors, conveyor etc.). Others sell anything and everything (all that *and* cleaning supplies). Industrial distribution has traditionally been a male-dominated business-to-business enterprise, but thousands of women do work in the field and more are discovering this hidden gem every day.

Katy Thomsen is a learning and development specialist with Van Meter Inc./Werner Electric in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The company has over a dozen branch locations and hundreds of employees. She said, "I found out about the industry through a mutual friend. Hearing how much respect and trust she had in the company along with the work/life balance I decided to apply. I have had opportunities both personally and professionally that I would not have been able to get anywhere else. I feel excited to wake up every morning and know that I am going to a place where I get to work in my passion area and do something that helps others learn, grow and succeed."

All Sizes and Types

Companies in the industrial distribution field run the gamut for size and management type, just like any other industry. Some are small, family run private companies, and others are publically traded conglomerates. The smaller companies are looking for sales people, customer service help, and delivery people. The larger firms have all that plus human resources, marketing, IT, accounting and more where women with special skills could find a niche.

Kaman Industrial Technologies, Bloomfield, Connecticut, is one of the larger companies in the field. Danielle Lea works in the human resources department for Kaman. She said "I stumbled upon this industry. Prior to working for Kaman, I had no idea such an industry even existed. Much to my surprise as I did my research I still didn't quite understand what this company did. Now that I've been in my role for about three and a half years I've learned just how dynamic this industry is."

Something New and Different Every Day

The women interviewed for this story who work in industrial distribution each noted the variety of experiences and people they encountered in their day-to-day work. Words like "rewarding, dynamic, possibilities and excitement" came through time and again.

Sandy Johns is a channel manager for Brady Corporation, an industrial supplier of labels and signs, printing systems and software, and safety devices. Johns said, "I jump out of bed every day and cannot wait to get started working. The people in this industry are fun,

professional, fair, and a friendly group to work with. There are always sixty-two things happening at the same time. There is never a dull moment!”

Kaman’s Lea agreed, “I love that there are so many areas of this industry. We only have about four million products that we can offer our customers. That’s huge...and very interesting to me.”

One young lady working for an electrical distributor said, “The market is constantly evolving and presenting new challenges. The innovative spirit is exciting. I could not imagine doing anything else.”

Family-Like Atmosphere

Many who work in the industry note a sense of integrity and values in the people who find and stay in it. Susan Conrado, a regional vice president with DXP Enterprises, Inc., started her career in 1983. She said, “(Working in this industry) has given me financial success, immense pride, accomplishment and independence. I have also been lucky enough to have developed incredible relationships with suppliers and fellow distributors, as well as members of the organizations that I have been involved with. We serve a variety of industries with multiple products. People in the industry tend to stay in the industry which fosters a ‘family’ environment.”

Jocelyn Clark has worked in marketing for State Electric Supply for the past five years. Clark noted, “My most rewarding experiences so far in my career comes from our team which works daily to make sure our company is putting its best foot forward within our market place. Those co-workers who build each other up, challenge each other and keep reality in check are the most refreshing and pleasant reward anyone could receive.”

Another said, “The most important reward is the relationships I have formed within this industry. I can honestly say that I have met some lifelong friends.”

Relationships, Experiences and Constant Learning Cap Off the Rewards

Getting started in industrial distribution may give some people pause, and there are challenges, like in any career field. One electrical distributor who recently marked her first anniversary in the field said, “I have to admit I was hesitant. Like many young women, I’m sure, the sound of electrical distribution didn’t completely excite me. But what did was the sound of opportunity, the sound of professional growth as well as personal growth and the sound of the training and new knowledge I would gain. I knew it would be a challenge but that’s what adds to what’s become the reward.”

Another with eight years of experience added, “You have to be a woman who’s not afraid to be alone in a room full of men; understanding that sometimes that’s a great thing and sometimes it stinks. You must be flexible and able to deal with many kinds of people. You have to be strong, independent and have unwavering integrity and a strong work ethic.” But she noted “The relationship building aspect of this business is wonderful.”

Jessica Anavim, a digital marketing specialist, said, “Over two years, I have learned not only about topics affecting my responsibilities, but also about the intricate relationships between distributors, suppliers, and customers. There is always an opportunity to learn something new in this field. Rarely (if ever) a day goes by that I don’t acquire a new piece of knowledge that I can immediately internalize and apply to my next project.”

Jody Root, a district manager and certified bearings specialist with distributor BDI said, “You cannot get by with your looks—it is all about your ability to solve problems, earn trust and develop relationships with those hard core guys who only want to do business with guys. When you earn their trust with your knowledge and abilities, they will call twenty-four seven. Women are now accepted and respected in our great industry and now hold positions in all facets of our business.”

Sara Blondin, a marketing communications manager also with BDI, said, “In industrial distribution every day is a new opportunity, a new challenge and a chance to be a problem solver.” This sentiment was echoed by many others as a common thread. In business, people are constantly looking for ways to do things better and industrial distributors are the ones delivering the means to achieve the goals.

Brady Corporation’s Johns said what she likes best about the field are, “The people and the constant learning I have experienced over the years.”

How to Get Started

The industrial distribution field is a hidden gem that not many people are aware of. Anavim advised young women to “Go for it! It’s a great place for career advancement and a wonderful field.”

Johns recommended, “Looking for internships and careers in the industrial market. Many women who start in this industry really like it and never leave it.”

Industrial Careers Pathway[®] (ICP) an organization that works to bring new people into entry level positions in the field of industrial distribution offers a database of companies that can be searched by zip code and other data as well as an online job board where job seekers can post their resumes at no charge. The organization will launch a searchable online directory of internship opportunities later this year at www.idcareers.org.

Van Meter’s Thomsen said, “Don’t underestimate the opportunities that are available in the field of industrial distribution. Growing up, I would have never said, ‘I want to work for an electrical distributor!’ Being in the industry now, I have hit the jackpot with the people and the company I work for. Be open to learning more about companies in this industry and finding your niche.”

Ginger Wheeler is the Director, Marketing & Communications for the Power Transmission Distributors Association (PTDA) and the PTDA Foundation which supports ICP along with American Supply Association, Industrial Supply Association Education Foundation, National Association of Chemical Distributors, National Association of Electrical Distributors, NAHAD-The Association for Hose & Accessories Distribution and NIBA-The Belting Association. Learn more at www.idcareers.org.