

Ep. 4 - Mentorship Schemes: All You Need To Know!

00:08 Hello and welcome back for another episode of the SheCanEngineer Podcast where we will be discussing mentorship and how mentoring schemes play a part in promoting diversity and inclusion. I am delighted to introduce Helen Ramsey, who is a mentor as part of the Women in Engineering Society's MentorSET scheme. Welcome, Helen! It's an absolute pleasure having you here and thank you for coming to talk to us today. So, aside from your mentoring, which you do in addition to your day job, you do so much more and so many- you have so many different volunteering roles. Please could you tell us a little bit more about yourself and your career journey and some of these things that you do?

00:56 Oh, thank you ever so much, it's so exciting to be here and be part of this. So yes, so my background is Chemical Engineering and so I'm now a Fellow of the Institute of Chemical Engineers (IChemE) and a Fellow of the Women in Engineering Society (WES). I started my career at British Steel as an Environmental Engineer, putting in environmental management standards across tube mills. Then I moved to a small water consultancy and then just over 21 years ago, I started in medical devices and I've had an exciting time building up an Engineering department, and really in the last few years, being able to try to encourage and find new ways to bring in wonderful new, diverse talent to make the whole balance of the Engineering team so much better. And we were working on new projects and new processes and existing support- Engineering support. So that's been quite, quite full on and quite fun. And then I've recently taken a move to much more of a part time portfolio-type role that helps me balance my volunteering roles. So my current part time role is as a Technology Board Advisor for the World Transport Agency Group, which is in freight forwarding and logistics -very different from medical devices and a really interesting space to work in. So, the voluntary schemes- it's been interesting! I started with the South Central Ambulance Service as a public governor for Oxfordshire- back in the start of 2020, just before the pandemic, so it's been a real journey, learning about how an organisation like the ambulances has to manage through the crisis situation. So I've learned a lot through that experience and they were absolute role models for me in diversity, the way they listen and understand and include voices from all different backgrounds, which is so important in health. So that's one of the roles! And then one of the other roles is through Congress as a fellow of the IChemE - so working on different strategies at the Institution is looking at and trying to offer different perspectives as part of that process, so that's been exciting as well. And then I do a lot of this mentoring both from my previous company but then also for Women in Engineering Society and also for students. So yes, that's me!

03:32 Wow! That's a lot! And well, there's a lot more that you haven't covered - for example, some of the, sort of, STEM stuff that you do as well.

03:40 Yes, yes, that's true. Yes, I've been a STEM Ambassador for a long time, and I I love going into - I have two schools particularly that I have been going into for the last 20 years, which is brilliant because of building up a relationship both with the staff and the pupils to try to introduce Chemical Engineering as an option to consider amongst the many that are out there. And yes, just looking at different ways of

working with - oh for example, STEM returners as well - they're are fantastic organisation associated with the Women in Engineering Society, but they've really helped me access diverse talent, but also help that talent to shine. So yeah, that there's been a load of work in STEM. You're right! I set up a chapter at my last company as well, where we encouraged lots of different employees working different parts of STEM to get together and work together, both men and women, but an enabler to try and help people get their careers- the best they can from their careers.

04:40 Fabulous! And I can see that you're also very passionate about diversity and inclusion!

04:46 Yes, most definitely yes!

04:50 Could you tell us a little bit more about WES - the Women Engineering Society, and the MentorSET scheme? Actually, maybe starting with actually what mentoring is? Maybe some of our audience might not know, for example, the difference between say, a mentor and perhaps teacher or coach or manager or sponsor? There's lots of these sorts of relationships out there - these professional types of relationships and mentorship is just one of them. But it is different to all of the others as well, isn't it?

05:27 It certainly is and I'm sure there are very strict definitions, so I can only give you my, kind of, take on it. But certainly you're right; it's different- a mentor and a coach are different. I think coaches are much more about asking questions and reflecting back, whereas mentoring does do that to some extent but also helps to maybe offer advice, maybe offer a perspective from experience that might help the mentee, and then maybe also introduce different contacts to offer up a, you know, a perspective from - say - new career path that that they might be exploring. And then I think you're right, mentor and manager is different too - I definitely agree because I think a manager has to have, you know, a set of goals they have to deliver to you and that may or may not align with the mentee's, kind of, career aspirations, and it's very difficult for a manager to sort of be effectively both at the same time - a mentor and a manager for someone. I think teacher is interesting, I think yes, mentoring is much more about trying to help the individual explore their own ways of tackling different challenges or exploring new opportunities rather than perhaps teaching from experience the right way to do something, say, it's a little bit more about trying to help the individual to have a much more personal experience of understanding what's right for them. I hope that helps.

06:59 Yeah, it really does. Yeah. And definitely have the sort of the barriers between those different types of relationships. When you go about finding a suitable mentor, it can be a bit of a minefield. A lot of questions that I personally get asked as well is- things like how do you go about finding one? What should you look for in a mentor? When's a good time to look for one? How many mentors should you have? And on the other side as well as a mentor, how many mentees should you have? And also you mentioned that you have actually been a mentor in both -in a company within industry and with WES; where should you look- is it better in the company or perhaps within WES where it's a little bit more, sort of, across across industry?

07:51 Oh gosh, there's lots of questions!

07:52 Yeah- sorry!

07:55 No, no - that's fantastic! You're right. I think that starting with the last bit, maybe around whether or not to go for your company or outside - I think that's a really interesting question and it can be right at a certain point for you to choose one within your company and it can also, just the same, the right not to. I think it depends what you want from your mentor and that's really the first place to start - is to try and understand in your own mind what is it you want from the mentoring relationship, because it's only when you're clear on, I don't know - a goal or some sort of aspiration that you're trying to identify and work towards - that you can work with your mentor on, that it will help you then choose who's the right mentor for you. So sometimes you might be trying to work through situations at work where perhaps you're facing a lot of challenges. Now, it could be possible you could identify someone at work who might be directly able, because they know the characters involved, to offer you some different options, and as long as you have that trust relationship there and it's not interfering with the work that you're trying to achieve, then I think that that's worth exploring. But equally, if you feel that due to the confidential nature of some of the conversations you're having, you want to keep it outside your company, then, you know, the Women in Engineering Society one, where it does offer across industry opportunities to seek mentors- it is, you know, a good option because it lets you have that distance between the situations you're dealing with and then the person who you're trying to talk through them with. And, I think it's interesting -originally I think I probably thought you had to stick with the same industry, but now having mentored people through very different industries from mine, I realise that actually people are people - wherever they are, and whenever situations they, sort of, find themselves in, there's usually some parallels that you can offer from an experience basis, but also some tools just, you know, sort of almost like coaching tools to help people to tackle these things in maybe just a slightly different way from how they have in the past- different ways of, you know, tackling, I don't know, organisational politics or managing people's motivation or- all that sort of side of it is definitely cross industry and some of the challenges around- particularly I think around diversity - that's very much cross industry and it is important to- I worry that if someone is from a- you know- a particular minority group, they seek mentorship from someone in the same minority group from themselves but then limit themselves to their own industry - that can be really hard for them to find someone who they feel they can relate to in the way that they want to. So exploring different industries from that perspective is also helpful. Did that help answer those questions?

11:00 It did, yes! What's interesting is the point you made about people seeking someone from the same minority group for themselves, and I think this all goes back to, I guess, the visible role models and, you know, representation actually really does matter. You know, those sorts of topics that we talk about a lot in the diversity and inclusion conversation. And I think you're right- from my own experience, when I was looking for a mentor, I actually, I kind of found it a bit difficult to look in my industry - yes, we have some really great inspirational women in the company and I did reach out to them and they, the ones I did reach out to have been really great mentors. And if we didn't have that mentoring relationship because, for example, they were too busy, which is fine! Everyone has lives -they can't take everyone on. But you

know, they were able to offer me the advice, but if I was to look for someone who looked like me, I would find it very difficult in the bubble that I was in - in my network.

12:12 Yes, I remember someone asked me that once and it was at a STEM event and they said I can't find anyone who isn't, you know, who looks like me in my field, but I want a mentor - what can I do? And I tried to explore with them, you know -what about maybe picking, because I think they were as you, sort of, describing a minority within a minority in, you know, in a particular area. So could they for example, pick one of those things and they were in a particular field, I think they were part of the university- so perhaps looking for them if they looked in that field and found someone who perhaps wasn't part of a minority group that might be an option, or as you describe- go for a different industry but be part of that minority group might be the right person for them, but they they would almost have to pick. But then if they did it for a year, hopefully they wouldn't be the pioneer by that stage -there might be someone who was in their industry and their field who did look like them. And the longer, you know, people come through, the more time there is for people to come through, then hopefully we will see more role models and then it will be more able- people can find someone who really does resonate with them.

13:22 Yeah, and with this - it kind of, moves us on to, sort of, how mentorship and mentoring and schemes play a part in promoting diversity and inclusion. You know, the impact that these schemes and a mentorship schemes have bridging the gap regarding diversity within the engineering industries, and having, sort of, lots of different types of mentorship schemes as well, it can be quite confusing, but I think the overall impact that they have as a collective- it must be positive, right?

13:56 Yes, yes, I definitely think it is. And one of the ways I think it is so important is that mentoring is very much about the individual and often when faced with, sort of, organisations, you have to try and find your own way to fit that organisation in some way in order to progress. Whereas mentoring allows you to be you and gives you the space to reflect on what other things that you're really really good at, what are your strengths, what do you bring? How can you use that specific and unique combination of strengths to add value to your role and your career and the opportunities that are there and the challenges to, you know, to address, but it's very much about giving you that space to explore. And then just that space to reflect on all the things you are just really good at as well, because if your mentor can sit there and talk to you about some of your achievements and some of what you've done, suddenly you know that space where you're working feel much more friendly place because you think 'oh gosh, look at all these things that, you know, I've done in my career, you know, and that's me!' And then you can bring that with you to your work and I genuinely think that, you know, helps to transcend some of the more challenging day-to-day, you know, issues and help you to get through them. And then, you know, deliver your best self and do the things that you really want to do in the future. So I think that's why it helps diversity. I genuinely believe it's a fantastic way to help, just reflect on all the good things and not the tricky things about, you know, diversity in these different fields.

15:40 And I guess if you've covered it there - why you do the mentoring; you dedicate a lot of your time with the MentorSET scheme as a mentor- it might sound a bit of a daft question but - why is it so important to you? Why do you dedicate all this time for it?

16:00 Now that's a very important question and I think really because I genuinely believe it makes a difference, and it makes a difference to every individual that, you know, that wants to seek a mentor, having someone there for them is a huge deal, at whatever point in their career. You know, I mean, I've had mentors who've, you know, I've sought out, just decided who it was and gone and asked them. And been fortunate that at that point they said yes and it's helped me through some really challenging times. And I know how much that meant to me in those times, and to be able to offer that to someone, to help them through whatever they're trying to do is a fantastic thing and it's a wonderful way to, you know, create this diversity in industry, particularly in Engineering. We need, you know, a whole - as much diversity as possible in the field to tackle some of the challenges of the future. And I don't want to keep going to these conferences where I don't see people who don't look anything like me and I'm trying to, you know, understand what they're saying and relate and add points. I want to make sure that the field does reflect the people who are living. So, we need to find ways, and I genuinely believe that mentoring is a great way to help people, because at the end of the day, it's about the individuals who make up the profession that makes it successful, and if we can't keep those individuals in the profession because you know, they don't feel that what they bring is valued, then we're never going to succeed. So yeah, all for mentoring.

17:32 As a mentee, I think I have some goals but I also worry that I am taking too much of their time, and I do think this is a - not an uncommon feeling, that sometimes the mentee may feel like they're a burden on the mentor, asking questions and taking up their time. and that sort of thing- I've certainly felt like it sometimes -not because the mentors made me feel that way. It's just sometimes I feel like I'm, like, are these dumb questions I'm asking them? Like, should I just like - do I want to, you know, waste their time with this? What would you say to those sorts of - that thinking of a mentee?

18:14 Oh well, that's such a sad- Yes, a sad thing - but you're right. It's absolutely -and I get people who say that to me, you know, 'oh, I don't want to waste your time on this'. And it's just - well, no- if it's important to you, then it's important to me, you know. And that I am sure mentors feel that, you know, across the board and that's why they do mentoring. And maybe to help with not feeling that you're asking too much is - at the start, once you have a conversation about mentoring with your new mentor and they are happy to do it, then maybe set those boundaries early on about how long and how many questions and if you need to reach out in between mentoring sessions, you know how often can you do that? What sort of thing would look all right for your mentor; and then once you've got those boundaries set at the beginning, hopefully that means that that time then is yours, and you feel happy that you can use it for whatever is troubling you at that time. I remember going to some mentoring training early on, and it's very much, you know, you may have goals, but the key point of a mentor is to check in at the beginning of the session, you know. Is that actually what you want to talk about today or is there something far more important that you need to discuss or work through or just get, you know, some reassurance on. And it just - it makes then the mentoring relationship much more individual and that's what, you know, that's what makes it work I think because you have that time and, you know, you can ask any of these things, but you need to ask- none of it is unimportant. Absolutely. If it's, you know, if it's

something you need to work on yourself, then I'm sure your mentor would be more than happy to talk through it with you. I hope that helps!

20:06 Yeah, that's some sound advice there! Some of it, I think, is about building that confidence and once you've got the relationship and that- the boundary is, like you mentioned, that you establish, it won't seem like you're wasting their time.

20:20 No, no, no. Hopefully, hopefully not. Yes. And then maybe as you get to know your mentor in your build that relationship and you feel more confident perhaps in being able to, sort of, talk about things in the way that you want as well, maybe that's part of the relationship you build hopefully.

20:37 So MentorSET, the Women in Engineering Society's scheme - it says it's open to men and women - which is great. But there are some, and I've noticed them particularly within industry, where they're open to women only. So this is quite a controversial question I think I'm going to ask you - do you think that these are a good idea -these women only mentoring schemes? Or do you think maybe they're potentially damaging to creating those inclusive environments that -one of the reasons that they set them up is to actually, you know, promote diversity and inclusion, but it's actually a detriment to creating that?

21:23 I think that's an interesting question, Laura, and I think, you know, that dynamic between the, sort of, the inclusion, but then the individual is an interesting one - because, I guess, for me and maybe it is controversial, but I genuinely believe that the whole purpose of the mentoring is about the mentee. And if the mentee feels they want a particular person as a mentor, I think they can ask for that person to help them because it is so personal. So whether these particular schemes facilitate access to particular people that they want to speak to, maybe that's a reason to have them. I just feel that with the inclusion, there's so much on the individual mentee - that it's really about helping them to feel what they bring is so much value that they continue to bring it and that they find new ways to feel that they are valued. And by giving them access to someone who is the individual that they feel, they need to speak to- maybe that's enough to say well, actually, for that person at that time, you know, that this is right. I mean, it comes back to the person who was asking me at the university, you know, I can't find someone in my field, you know, who is in this particular minority group of a minority of a minority. And yet they were really desperate to speak to someone who was - you know, who met those criteria for them to feel able, basically someone who looks like them -the whole powerful piece around 'if they can do it, so can I'. And if it's more difficult for them to find someone then that's hard. And yeah, so I think for that reason, I think it's important that there are all sorts of schemes open to all different types of different groups in different areas and then that hopefully provides enough diversity for people to be able to find the right mentor for them. Yeah - it's a hard one!

23:26 It is! One of the things I think about a lot is, sort of, the inclusivity element of D&I. And I also think that if you don't create inclusive environments- once you get your diversity in, they're not going to stay because they don't feel included, they're still going to feel like outsiders. And I think it's important to get that inclusivity aspect of it right to be able to retain that diversity, that diverse talent.

23:56 Yeah, I completely agree with you. And I think one of the ways mentoring can absolutely help with that is reverse mentoring, because it's often the case that the people who aren't being inclusive really just don't understand and don't make the time to understand what it is like to be part of a, you know, a diverse group. And having that reverse mentoring regularly can really change that. And it's quite a powerful way to help someone see, you know, just open their eyes to something that they've never really given the time to explore. And, you know, I think that's a very powerful way to help organisations move forward. And I think you're right - in an organisation, as well having a mentoring scheme open to all is incredibly important to make it inclusive. I'm just thinking there maybe there is an option somewhere to help people who do feel so much part of a minority to find someone.

24:52 You've just touched on reverse mentoring there - just for the benefit of the audience, if they don't know what reverse mentoring means - would you just be able to explain what that is?

25:03 Yes, sure. So I think it means where you have someone, for example in a senior leadership position, someone who has influence and power in the organisation, who then has a reverse mentoring session with someone who is maybe at the start of their career, or from a very different background, or not in a position of power in that same way that that senior leader is. And by having that access and regular access with these regular sessions, with this reverse mentoring situation, it means that there can be a whole range of topics explored about what it feels like to be a minority in their organisation, and to manage, in that space, on a regular basis, the sorts of challenges they have to just, you know, get through and work through everyday, that oftentimes, sadly, people who don't face any of those challenges don't see. So yeah, that's how I describe it, Laura!

26:08 It's a really interesting thing to get your head around - it's almost like breaking down those barriers and, sort of, looking at the different generations as well, and sort of breaking that down and being able to learn from each other.

26:24 Yes!

26:25 Everyday's a school day, as some of my colleagues would say!

26:31 Yeah, you're right! You're so right. Yes. And as a mentor, I find that whenever I have a mentoring session with a mentee, I'm sure I learn as much as anything they learn out of it because it's just refreshing. It's so lovely to get a fresh perspective on, you know, situations and challenges, but also, I sometimes find, some of the, you know, the younger generation just have so much more expectation now that, you know, this is not OK - and some of the things in my, kind of, time I've just accepted: 'well it is, you know, how it is'. No, it's not OK and they challenge that and quite right too and it's you know helping, as you say, bridge that gap to get that insight, you know across the board, and not just one way, yeah.

27:22 Just on a final note, If anyone wants to - if anyone is interested in the mentorSET scheme, how do they get involved?

27:31 So there is a link on the Women in Engineering Society website and you click on that and it takes you to the mentorSET scheme, and you can apply to join through there. So I think that's the best way, yeah.

27:43 Brilliant! Thank you very much for taking time to talk to us today. We've covered some really interesting topics just on mentoring! Who knew that, you know, we could talk for hours about mentoring! Well, I'd like to thank you on behalf of the SheCanEngineer Committee, I do really appreciate your time! So thank you very much, Helen.

28:07 Ah thank you so much, it's been wonderful to be a part of it and I wish you every success in all that you're doing and let's hope there are lots more mentees and mentors now coming forward! That would be brilliant!

28:16 Yes! Thank you very much!

28:19 Thank you!