

Profile

Ingrid Chauvet is crackling with energy and has ambitions for her eight-strong practice, RISE Structural Engineers, to grow to be as large as Arup. Jackie Whitelaw wouldn't bet against her.



Ingrid Chauvet will be 42 on Fireworks Night

this year. It is an appropriate birthday for someone who has had the courage to launch her own business – not even in her native country – and who plans to create real sparks in the world of structural engineering.

Chauvet is French and set up RISE Structural Engineers in Bristol in 2010 after feeling she was hitting a bit of a glass ceiling in terms of developing her career. 'I knew I could do a better job at running a practice than most, so rather than rail about not being part of the establishment club, I thought I'd start my own thing – pushed additionally by the company I worked for at the time closing down,' she says.

Seven years on, she is honest enough to admit that perhaps her assessment of her last managers had been a bit harsh. 'I had felt overlooked and not supported,' she says. 'But now as a boss I understand that running a business forces you to focus on the clients and cash flows, not always the employees. I try to look after my staff well, but it is a fine balance. You are fighting fire most of the time. I have definitely grown up in the last few years.'

A holistic approach

She has also created a successful practice that aims to turn over £500 000 this year and now employs a total of eight engineers.

The firm prides itself on practical, elegant and economical design, and how a project can be most efficiently constructed. And to set RISE apart from many structural engineering businesses, the company likes to have a hand in everything, including piling design and reinforcement drawings.

'Why not?' Chauvet asks. 'I don't understand why structural engineers don't do this as a matter of course, rather than leave it to specialist contractors. It means you learn, and you provide something the client requires that helps reduce risk. And by answering your clients' needs, you increase your scope of work, and your fees.'

Recent projects have included the £15M Bengal Mill development in Manchester to create offices and flats, and a circus performance school at St Paul's Church in Bristol, along with residential schemes. But the company is now large enough to be able to get its teeth into even more challenging commissions. These include the 'P' shaped Gatehouse Building (Figure 1) in London with architect Jonathan Dransfield; working with Leeds developer CITU on a low-carbon district including 516 low-carbon homes designed to Passivhaus standards; and the Big Blue Motaman steel and timber-framed project in Bristol with Barefoot Architects.

All the jobs are very different, requiring expertise in steel, concrete and timber-frame construction. 'The first thing I knew I did not want to do when I set up the business was to specialise,' Chauvet says. 'That is a very dangerous thing to do.'

'Even though we do a lot of timber-frame work, I do not want us just to focus on that. At the end of the day, a load is a load and a column – whether it is steel, timber or concrete – is a column and it is for a purpose. I want us to be the best in all sectors, otherwise I limit the market and the opportunities for my engineers to develop. I want my staff to be rounded and able to transfer knowledge, with the added benefit that the variety of work will keep them happy, flexible and open to change.'

Giving and receiving support

Chauvet has had some excellent mentors in the past for her own engineering career and is keen to give her staff a similar experience (Figure 2). 'I want to give them the best chance to develop their expertise and to have authority and, crucially, responsibility for projects. Very often senior engineers get the authority without responsibility, which is borne instead by a director. Here my engineers are doing everything from fee proposals to meeting clients and producing feasibility studies, with my support. Even as my company grows, I will always want this to be the case.'

'Support is the key – as Freud said, teaching is all about propping up. You teach people to do things on their own by giving them support and gradually removing the props – a very suitable analogy for structural engineers. They might be a bit wobbly to start with, but it gives them the chance to learn something new.'

Chauvet also shares financial information about the business with her staff. 'I was sharing detail about my P&L, cash flow and working capital early on,' she says. 'We have regular meetings about this and sometimes I put the £900 that represents a day's work on the table in cash and ask them to divide it up between all the necessary expenditure as if they were the boss – it is very revealing for everyone.'

Chauvet is honest about needing help herself in developing the business. After something of a false start and the rash employment of an administration assistant early on, which meant she invested in overheads without corresponding income, Chauvet decided she needed a business mentor. Greville Commins (of mentoring and coaching consultancy Varoom) took on that role and has been with her since 2013, during which time the firm has grown significantly.

'I needed advice because from the beginning I knew I wanted to create a business, not work as a sole trader,' she says. 'And then the interesting question was: what size of business do I want to be? Well, I want to be the size of Arup, so I needed help in how to do this, what



Figure 1
Recent projects include the unusual Gatehouse Building in London



Figure 2
Chauvet seeks to involve staff deeply in the business



the next steps would be.

'Since Greville came on board, the firm has doubled in size every year. Going forward we will absorb other companies and maybe I will get a partner. But I very much want to keep control.'

Chauvet started the business with £10 000 and had no clients lined up at all. 'Because the company I'd worked for was closing, I didn't feel comfortable with taking existing clients, it didn't feel morally fair,' she says. 'So I set up a business plan, a website – but for the first six months I had no work. But I did network – joining the local breakfast networking event group, the Institute of Directors and the Architecture Centre in Bristol.'

'From there came small engineering jobs – starting with a house extension.'

'The first thing I bought with my first cheque was an espresso machine. I need to have decent coffee.'

Apathless worm

Here is a good time to explain how a French woman with a love of strong coffee ended up establishing a business in tea-drinking England, and in Bristol in particular.

Chauvet studied Civil Engineering at Egletons in southwest France, graduating in 1996 during a recession. Through the EU's Erasmus student exchange programme she opted to do an extra year in Building Technology and Management at the University of Glamorgan in Cardiff.

'That was a difficult year. My English was appalling and my notes had more blanks than words because I did not understand so much. Halfway through I thought: I have a choice – go or try harder. I tried harder and got my BEng.'

'I still couldn't find a job in France, so looked in England and my first post was as a quantity surveyor on a water-treatment plant on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent. I really started on the very bottom rung of the ladder, but it was a good way to understand construction and I met another site engineer there – Katherine – who is now my best friend.'

Chauvet then worked with Alan Crossman (latterly Institution President in 2016) at MWH before moving to Alan Conisbee & Associates and then Michael Barclay Partnership in London. She enjoyed working for them all, gaining confidence as an engineer, learning about good leadership and the tensions involved in running a small business.

'In a small business, you need to get things right and produce faster. To maintain the quality, your relationship with the client and contractor has to be a lot closer than is traditional in a big firm,' Chauvet says. 'I've taken my London pace into my business in Bristol.'

Chauvet left London because, although the work was interesting, there was no time to go out or meet people. 'I was lonely and thought

I would try a smaller city, plus Katherine was living in Cardiff and it was closer to visit her. I was also hoping it would be a bit sunnier – I am from Avignon in the south of France so I miss the sun a lot!

She joined CCB evolution in 2008 then, when the practice closed in 2010, started out on her own.

There was also corresponding upheaval in her private life. Her marriage ended, but there is a happy twist. Chauvet is now with a teacher who has two twin 10-year-old sons and they are helping her develop her management skills. 'The great thing with children is that if they want to do something, they do it 100%, but if not, they do it not at all. So you have to find a way to entice them. It is the same in management. If people don't believe in you 100%, they don't give you 100%. I am learning how to take people along with me. Hopefully all the way to employing thousands.'

LIVING LIFE TO THE FULL

Ingrid Chauvet lives by the mantra that you should always challenge yourself to do something new; it helps you be more creative.

In her case, the latest new thing is motorcycle riding. 'I have a little 125cc Honda CBR and am getting ready for my riding tests. My next move will be a 600cc Ducati Monster. Maybe eventually the 1200cc; one step at a time.'



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