

profile

A closer look at our members and their interests

60
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with...

Helen Neville

A passion for innovation



HELEN NEVILLE
FRSC

Helen Neville is Vice-President, R&D Packaging Development Capability and Western Europe Innovation Centres, at Procter & Gamble (P&G).

She joined P&G after completing her PhD at the University of Southampton in 1987 and has built a distinguished career in R&D. Helen has three children and is active in P&G's women's R&D support programme.

"We truly compete on a global stage, so it will be critically important to produce world-class innovations"

Q What made you choose a career in industry rather than academic chemistry?

A I was always focused on research in industry rather than academia and my career decisions were between different types of industry. As a teenager I wanted to do research in the pharmaceutical industry and that was why I chose my PhD in organic chemistry. Half-way through my PhD I decided to work in consumer products rather than pharmaceuticals.

Q Which chemical innovations at P&G have really impressed you?

A Some of our innovations have changed the fundamental chemistry that's been in place for decades.

Laundry granules have always contained builders which remove calcium and magnesium from the wash solution. In our fabric care business we developed a surfactant polymer system that reduces the effects of calcium so it can stay in the wash solution. This helps the enzyme performance so the product performs better. It also enables us to compact the product so we use less packaging and less fuel to transport it.

In our hair care business we developed an alternative to conventional hydrogen peroxide systems, using ammonium carbonate as the bleach engine. We knew this would give better bleaching, but it also generated a lot of free radicals that would damage the hair. We used a glycine radical scavenger to prevent the damage.

Q How do you see the future for technology and innovation in Europe?

A We truly compete on a global stage, so it will be critically important to produce world-class innovations and be clear about where we focus. At P&G we know that a lot of our future growth will come from Asia, so we need to build our R&D presence there. We're also going to maintain a strong presence in Europe and we've clearly defined the focus areas for innovation work here.

Q How do you find juggling family life with a Vice-President role?

A I feel very fortunate because I have a wonderful family and I really enjoy my career. It's a very busy life, but it never occurred to me that I wouldn't be able to do it. Planning is very important: I plan my whole year in advance to make sure work and family commitments are all taken into account.

Q What would you say to young women considering a career in chemistry?

A We spend so many of our waking hours working, it's important that we find it interesting and satisfying. With chemistry, you can work for government, a university or in a huge range of industries. An increasing amount of research and innovation is done in teams, and women often bring a unique skill set to that – so if you find chemistry fascinating, go for it!

THE RSC AND P&G WORKING TOGETHER

Forming strategic partnerships with industrial organisations is central to the RSC's commitment to support chemistry in industry. The RSC currently works with P&G in a number of areas. P&G support RSC educational projects such as providing demonstration talks at RSC 'Chemistry@Work' events and supporting teacher training. P&G are also working with the RSC on 'Faces of Chemistry', a series of educational videos being created for the International Year of Chemistry. In addition to this, two P&G employees have already given public lectures at the Chemistry Centre and P&G sponsors the RSC Environment Prize. The RSC is now in discussions with P&G to explore further how the organisations can work together.

If your organisation is interested in working with the RSC, please contact the RSC Development Team. development@rsc.org