Driving sustainability

Jacqueline O’Donovan, managing director at O’Donovan Waste Disposal, on the ever-present challenges of the waste industry

B eing thrust into the family waste management business as a teenager, Jacqueline O’Donovan didn’t so much choose the industry she would work in as fall into it by default. It is an industry she now loves, but one in which she can see the flaws too clearly most significantly, a short-sighted approach that sometimes neglects employee training, and a tendency still to regard “price as king over compliance.”

In the years since she became Managing Director of the company, O’Donovan has become a pioneer in the sector for an approach that sees investment in skills and training as not just beneficial but essential – both to staff wellbeing and the bottom line. As the only female MD of a waste company in London, she has also become a pioneer for women in a heavily male-dominated environment.

“I think because I’ve never known anything different, I didn’t really see prejudice,” she reflects. “But I have had to prove that I know what I’m talking about. It used to be that I’d go into a room, a blonde woman in six-inch heels, and I’d have to change perceptions. Now when I walk into a room full of men, their knees are knocking!”

O’Donovan’s father died when she was 17, and she and her three siblings took on the business. By 19, she was Managing Director. The firm provides all types of waste management services – skips, grabs, site clearance, demolition – but in the beginning O’Donovan’s knowledge of the industry was limited to what she’d picked up while answering the telephone after school.

“It was all hands to the pump,” she recalls. “It wasn’t completely alien to me because I’d helped out in the office, but I didn’t have a clue about the business side of things.”

In the early days, O’Donovan learnt on her feet – “and I still learn every day. Every day’s an education.” But as each year passed and the regulations changed, the industry also changed, and she began to focus on training and gaining qualifications – the first of which was an evening course so that she could become the firm’s legally required Transport Manager. O’Donovan is passionate about the difference that effective training can make.

“I’m a firm believer that training your people to be their best is an asset to the company. But others in the industry see it as an expense, which I really struggle to understand. If you train the person who picks waste so they know what they need to do and why, they’re going to do the job better. To me, the benefits of training are so obvious.”

The firm won funding to put 66 members of staff through operator competence training, which was delivered in multiple languages. “It meant low-skilled staff who had English as a second language had the opportunity to get a qualification,” she says. They learned about segregating waste, but they also learned about health and safety looking after their own safety, and the safety of colleagues working around them.

In recent years there has been a huge focus on collisions involving cyclists and construction vehicles in London. O’Donovan has focused even more on safety and training strategies and has developed a robust training plan for the firm’s lorry drivers. All of the company’s drivers completed the Driver CPC [Certificate of Professional Competence] 18 months in advance of the deadline. Initially, O’Donovan brought in external trainers, but she found they didn’t always understand the challenges of driving in London. “It got to the point where the drivers felt they couldn’t ask questions. I’m of the opinion that there’s no such thing as a stupid question: you should feel able to ask anything. So I trained to become a trainer and now I do courses myself.”

The drivers enjoy it, because they know that she knows what they’re going through. “For some of our people, classroom training is daunting, but with me they’re relaxed. People are happy to learn if they’re enjoying it.”

Sharing the road with pedestrians and cyclists is an ever-present challenge for everyone in London and is the subject that most concerns HGV drivers. O’Donovan’s workplace takes part in Safer Urban Driving courses, which sees them take to the roads on bikes themselves. The training provides practical, first-hand experience of cycling with an instructor and getting in close proximity to HGVs and buses. This allows drivers to appreciate what cyclists experience and better understand the relationship between the two parties.

Training focusing on fuel efficient driving is also given to staff and drivers are encouraged to adopt these behaviours beyond work to their home lives, as that provides the best motivation for safe and environmentally aware behaviour. With 20 years in the industry behind her, O’Donovan is aware of the dangers of becoming “blinded” when it comes to risk management – and health and safety in particular. Her ethos is to have a clear understanding of every aspect of the company’s operations. After all, she points out, “I’ve never had a job interview, never mind another job!” With this in mind, she gained her NEBOSH qualification. “I didn’t want to just employ someone with a health and safety qualification, because how would I know they were giving me the right advice? I needed to know how to do it myself. If someone asks me a question I can’t answer, I’ll go and find out the answer – that’s how I am.”

Around five years ago, feeling that the company’s systems needed a refresh, O’Donovan engaged a consultancy to evaluate its position and make improvements. One innovation was a ‘safety champions’ scheme. “They trained the next tier of management, so every part of the business has its own safety champion. We have a champion in the yard, at the recycling depot, on the tipper fleet, in the office, and so on.”

Looking ahead, O’Donovan anticipates various challenges for the industry. Primary among these is “getting everyone on board with the circular economy” [a regenerative system that focuses on design, maintenance, reuse and recycling to achieve sustainability, as opposed to a linear system which ends in disposal].

Brexit is a looming concern: “We have a driver shortage,” she points out. “It’s crippling us. We need low-skilled workers who we can train up.”

Within the industry, O’Donovan intends to keep banging the drum for investment in training, and she has the figures to support her argument. As a result of its driver training programme, the company has achieved a 20% reduction in insurance costs due to safer driving, a 27% reduction in fuel consumption, and a 21% reduction in its carbon footprint.

“Margins are so small in this industry – you’re looking at 3%. But I want to show people that you can do it right and still make money.”