

RWE

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#5 ISSUE

Pushing  
for progress

Never accept the situation  
as is, just because.

ZSUZSANNA

Director of Legal, Germany



# I wanted to become a Director, but it was more about what I could do when I was there.

**Zsuzsanna Sessel-Zsebik** discusses the legal profession, self-belief and finding a role where she can create change.

**Zsuzsanna is a truly influential woman in the business. Her team lays the legal foundations that allow RWE to produce energy for millions. But you wouldn't know it. There's an openness to her that would put anyone at ease. So, I dive straight in.**

**How have you got to where you are today?**

My ambition level was always higher

than I got rated as. So, I think it's by looking at how I'm doing, and continuously improving. Addressing the feedback that I've got from people who believed in me. It's rare that someone dares to tell you what they really think. So, if they say, "You'll never get to the next level *unless* this happens." then you have to address those shortcomings.



**Can you give us an example?**

It happened in my very first role. I'd trained as a Hungarian Lawyer and moved to Germany with my husband. That's when I started working at EON (now RWE). My manager said, "You're smart and doing a good job. But you aren't German qualified, so you have difficulties, even when doing international business."

This truly bothered me. I thought, "Why am I being downgraded, simply because I don't have the paper?". But German Law has its own specifics, and what I'd learned wasn't entirely transferrable. So, I took that feedback on board. I agreed to work part-time, studied and finished my full qualification in Germany.

**Did you always want to become a Director?**

Actually, my most hated question is, "Where do you see yourself in five years?". I don't plan like that. I prefer "Where do you see *your projects and your team* in five years?" Throughout my career, I've always wanted to become influential. The higher you are, the more power you get to do things your way.

I never had a particular position in mind, I just wanted to grow. That means the next level, the bigger project, the more complex challenge. Eventually yes, I wanted to become a Director, but it was more about what I could do when I was there.

**What were your initial challenges and how did you overcome them?**

Every position, every decade, every task has its challenges. When I started, the biggest challenge was being accepted. I was a foreigner, and young, and a woman. The legal team had just one female (later, two). The entire profession

was very male-driven and competitive. You had to prove that you were making an essential contribution. You had to prove that you are indispensable.

I was always bothered that a competitive environment didn't incentivise teamwork due to this elbow mentality. We could achieve much more if we worked together and built on each other's creativity and know-how.

**How did you change that environment?**

What I believe was always my principal strength (and it still is) is how I choose to organise the team. It's how I believe a legal team should be working, not what's expected. For example, traditionally, you organise a team by region – but this doesn't promote sharing experiences cross-border. Instead, we organise ours in international practice groups that work closely together.

**Do you have any advice for others looking to do things differently?**

Yes. Speak up. Show the alternatives. Never shy away. Never accept the situation as is, just because.

**Do you ever question yourself?**

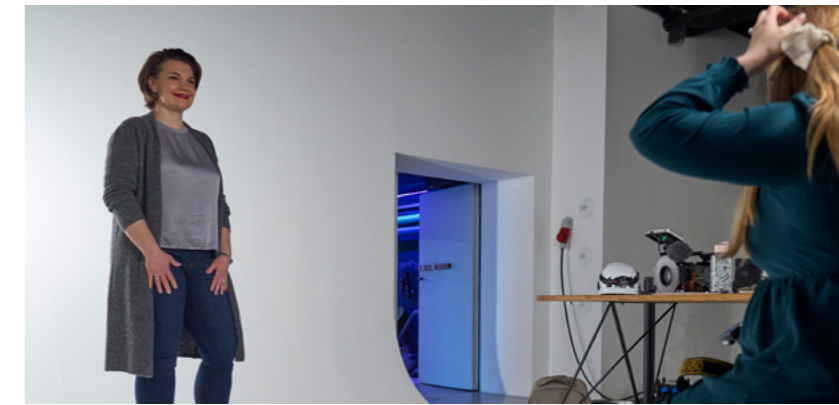
Certainly, I have my doubts which need to be overcome. A good example is how I got into my first leadership position. My manager asked me whether I was interested in applying for a team lead role and I said I wasn't ready. Then it was given to an external candidate who wasn't the right fit. Over the next couple of months, I was really disappointed. I kept asking myself why I didn't take it. I could've done much better with minimum leadership experience! But once that manager moved to a different role, there was an opening again. Then I went for it. And I got it.



**“Every position, every decade, every task has its challenges.”**



“If you stop becoming creative and you stop growing, you are shrinking actually.”



**What motivates you?**

I look to the number of positive experiences that I've collected over my career. It's proof that if you follow your own vision, and you do it consistently, you'll reach it. There's a feeling of satisfaction that comes when you've insisted on a plan, and you see the positive results. Outcomes that have worked out because you've played an influential role.

**Do you have anyone who's shaped your career?**

I don't have *one* role model. I have many. I admire them all for certain skills. I don't want to copy, but to build on their experience. Ultimately, I always try to follow my own way.

**What advice would you give other women wanting to advance?**

Never settle. Once you get into a position where you feel comfortable, you are building your routines and applying them. If you stop becoming creative and you stop growing, you are shrinking actually.

**How have you balanced your private and professional goals?**

You can't really cut off... If you have this always improving mindset, a great idea might come at an unexpected moment - like while cleaning or jogging. And you want to implement it immediately.

So, for me, a job was never nine to five. I take my working time flexibly. If my daughter has a performance, I go with her. Also, after dinner I might sit down and write two more emails, because I've had time to reflect.

# “Really, it’s the people of RWE who’ve supported me the most.”

## How would you go about improving your team?

Giving open feedback just like I’m asking for it. But also offering everyone the opportunities to perform at their best. So, if that means a training, or a new task or a new project to improve themselves, that’s how I develop them.

## If you could tell other women something they didn’t know about you and your experience, what would you say?

Women tend to have more doubts, especially about themselves. And adapt themselves to the situation. What I would do is exactly the contrary. Speak up. Trust yourself. And believe in your vision.

## How do you keep that positive mindset in everything you do?

I like to look back on the last 20 years and I’m happy with where I am. And I

want to keep that momentum up for the next 20. I know that I can’t just lay back. The journey continues.

## How has RWE helped you in your career?

The size of the company, the multiple tasks and positions have offered me many, many opportunities to develop, and to contribute to business success. Really, it’s the people of RWE who’ve supported me the most.

After 20 years in the business, Zsuzsanna has all the energy and determination of someone just getting started. And that’s the brilliant thing about her. She’s challenging the status quo and pushing for progress – all while believing she can. And we’re totally here for it. This is the era of women finding their power and owning it, unapologetically.

