



Interview with *SHERRY HESS*

For Women, the Industry Presents New Opportunity

Interview by CHRIS DeMARTINO | Technical Editor

At IMS 2016, Women in Microwaves (WIM) will be presenting a panel session that focuses on leadership. Sherry Hess, who is widely known for her contributions to the RF/microwave industry, spoke to *Microwaves & RF* about diversity in the RF/microwave industry. Sherry is vice president of marketing at National Instruments, AWR Group.

The RF/microwave industry here in the U.S. is obviously a male-dominated arena. Do you think the industry is doing its part to encourage women to enter the field?

Nearly a year ago now, I had the chance to attend the WIE (Women in Engineering) Leadership Conference that was held in Silicon Valley. Intel CEO Brian Krzanich restated his “Diversity Challenge” to his company, which stated that Intel would reach full representation by 2020.

While I’ve not seen a firm in our own microwave space issue a similar challenge, I do know that our own IEEE MTT society is actively seeking to improve diversity and taking direct action to embrace and grow female representation within our society.

To be specific, over the past few years our Women in Microwaves group, a subset of IEEE Women in Engineering (WIE), has grown and expanded its footprint to include activities at IEEE-sponsored conferences worldwide. For the first time last year at IMS, the traditional WIM networking cocktail party was expanded to include an all-female track on the topic of 5G, as well as a panel discussion on “Diversity in Microwaves.”

This is clearly a start at placing a spotlight on the women in our industry, and hopefully encouraging networking and support among us all so that we can inspire and attract more women into technical professions—in particular our RF/microwave industry.

How do you think that diversity can benefit the RF/microwave industry?

Many sources say diversity is good for business. One that I’ve cited prior is *The New York Times* “Women at Work” series, written by Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg and University of Pennsylvania Wharton School Professor Adam Grant. This article cites research that shows women bring different knowledge, skills, and networks to the table. It further states that raising women’s participation in the workforce to the same level as men could raise the GDP by 5% in the U.S. and 9% in Japan.

Intel’s Krzanich says data suggests that best-in-class companies with the highest level of racial diversity generate 15 times more sales than those with the lowest levels. Diversity in the work force is not just a matter of fairness: Diversity is good for business. As such, it is a vital part of the future success of our high-tech industry.

With technology playing such a major role in our lives, do you think this will lead to girls gaining an interest in STEM at an earlier age?

Absolutely. The key is for girls to believe that STEM careers are cool and exciting, and solve real-world life problems. We need to lose the stigma that being smart is a synonym for “nerd” or “geek.” I do see great strides toward doing this across industry, academia, and even social media in recent years.

One data point is back in 2013, when I remember watching (and loathing) the Teen Choice Awards with my daughter. But in the end I was stunned and excited when Ashton Kutcher made his now famous speech about “the sexiest thing in the world is being really smart...” This is exactly what young people contemplating a future in STEM need to hear, and especially those thinking about RF/microwave engineering.

My own theory is that in order to encourage more young minds to become engineers and scientists, we need to work toward inspiring them (here both men and women can help) through a concerted communications program to foster awareness and camaraderie, as well as focus on programs that tap into the “wonderment” of our career choice. If you’ve not yet heard of Makerspace, check it out (makerspace.com). It is an active program doing exactly this...adding “wonderment” into young people in elementary schools and beyond.

Why would you personally recommend a career in the RF/microwave industry to a young woman?

When I am asked what I do for a living, I say “my company makes the products that allow you to use all the wireless gadgets you love.” This is true, and I find being in the forefront of technology both exciting and fulfilling. Does this speak more to women vs. men? I’m not sure. But if being able to see the output of your efforts in the real world and its importance in shaping the future of our “connected lives” matters to anyone reading this, then a career in the RF/microwave industry is a great choice for you. **mw**