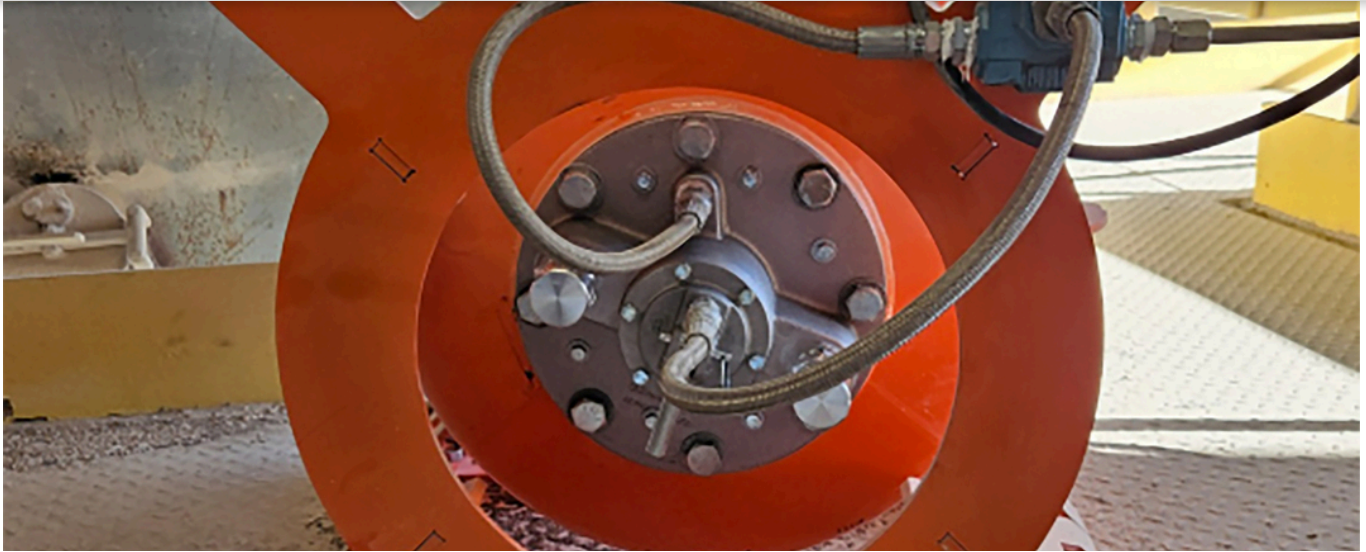


PROCESSING

Martin Engineering women: 'Don't be afraid! You have something to offer'

Key employees reflect on their careers, and share their advice

Alex Rayner



Martin Engineering provides bulk handling solutions, including this product, The X-Stand | Credits: Martin Engineering

17 October 2025



As part of our continuing series, *Mining Magazine* is interviewing women about their careers to date, and the advice they would offer others on a similar career path. Martin Engineering, the US-headquartered firm, has been solving bulk-material handling problems for over 80 years. Two key employees, Fran van der Berg, general manager of Martin Engineering Africa, in Emalahleni, South Africa, and Ashwini Khunte, regional head of sales and marketing, EMEA, at Martin Engineering, in Pune, India, have played more than their fair part in many of those solutions. They tell us how they came to work for the company, what it takes to work in a male-dominated industry, and what tips they would give their younger selves.

First here's Fran.



Fran van der Berg | Credits: Martin Engineering

What is your education and professional background?

to the uni. Then I went on to work at a motor dealership; then I started my journey in Martin Engineering.

Tell us more about your start in the mining industry

It began 13 years ago; I was an intern in the marketing department. I thought I would be there for about six months, but the current marketing manager resigned, just before one of our massive trade shows. I've since learned that I'm good at crisis management because I was thrown into the deep end. Over the following years, I became the marketing manager. Then, just after Covid, I was promoted to the position that Ashwini [interview below] now holds: the regional head of sales and marketing.

I think that was a good journey for me, because I got a lot of exposure to lots of different cultures. One of the things that I've learned is that you sometimes get a bit stuck, or you use your own country's culture as an excuse to stay in your comfort zone. But when you deal with [lots of] different people, you really have to think of how you communicate, so that everyone can understand.

What is your role now at Martin Engineering, and how do you make an impact?

I was promoted, about two years ago, to the general manager position. There was a lot for me to learn. I've always been very close [to] sales and HR, but all the other functions of the company presented quite a steep learning curve for me. Also, South Africa is quite a hierarchical country, and some of the industries are still very traditional in their way of thinking.

So the big thing I try to do is just to just listen to people, ask questions, and explain why something is happening, so people understand why you are asking for something or doing something in a certain way. I try to be very clear, so people can understand where we are going, and how it is aligned within the business. So far, it's gone well.

We've had year-on-year growth, although there've been lots of challenges. However, if you know you're doing the right thing, and you keep on doing the right thing, then eventually you get that breakthrough. So, I think I made a big impact just by listening to people. Everyone just wants to be heard.

What advice would you give women looking to get into the industry?

Women tend to forget what we bring to a business relationship. We don't have to go into a male-dominant mode, because we have other ways of seeing things. For instance, we are often much more detailed, and we're good with analytics and seeing how the puzzle pieces fit together. So my advice is to be inquisitive.

I also think that sometimes we try to make ourselves a bit smaller, or we don't necessarily voice all our opinions or ask all the questions. If you walk into a male-dominated boardroom, it is sometimes intimidating, and I think that should change. I also believe women should give other women opportunities, because sometimes we all can be hard on ourselves and each other. That's also an important point.

lot of time and energy. Now, I think, enjoy the ride, enjoy the moment that you are in. In each period of your life, there's something that you learn or enjoy, so don't worry about unimportant things.



Ashwini Khunte | Credits: Martin Engineering

What is your education and professional background?

I'm a mechanical engineer. I studied engineering and worked as a graduate trainee. After that I worked as a design engineer for two years. Before joining Martin, I was at another organisation which was not directly connected to bulk material handling. It was related to conveyors, but not the mammoth kind; the conveyors that you see in the airports, or the conveyors which are used on automobile assembly lines. I was drafting and designing things, which was quite exciting for a new engineer.

Tell us more about your start in the mining industry.

I started in Martin in 2013 as a design engineer. I worked for four or five years in design. However, design engineering was actually only part of my job; I used to do the other stuff related to operations, because Martin was quite new in India at that time. We had just three people in operations, including me!

I did that for four or five years, gaining experience on the product and back-office side of the business. After that, I got the opportunity to move to the front of the business, to the sales process, and I worked as a project engineer. I used to take care of the big engineering, procurement and construction (EPC) or original equipment manufacturer (OEM) projects, starting from inquiry to the last payment. You see, at that point, you need to do a reasonable amount of technical clarification, and because I had a technical background, I could handle those kinds of things.

I also got exposure to customers, which was quite far outside of my comfort zone. Then got an opportunity to manage a product portfolio, conveyor products, and that is big in India. Most of our revenue comes from it. That's where I got exposure to customer sites, and mining. I used to present technical presentations to customers. Then, last year, I got promoted, to manage the region in the role of head of sales and marketing. It's very different from what I did before. Again, it's a journey.

How do you feel you make an impact now that you've brought your technical expertise and the kind of customer facing side of things together in your current role?

I feel I've learned a lot about different countries' cultures, and having exposure to places like Europe has really changed me. Europe is important for us, and Europe and India are entirely different. In my current role, I am trying to realign the market growth that we have in India with other big countries, which are on different trajectories. India is growing, and we are focusing on how we grow our share of business in India. We've changed our approach to certain products, and certain industries. And we are seeing double-digit growth in one of our key product lines. We have doubled sales this year, which has a tangible impact, and is something that we as a team should be proud of.

In India, we are changing our work culture; we are trying to get everyone together. India is quite hierarchical, and there are still some old ways of doing things in the industry. I think we are a little different; the average age of the teammates that we have in India would be around 30. So, we are quite close and our work is aligned. That team spirit is really, really important for me. I am also trying to get my team to think more technically. They are getting more interested in technical parts! I am trying to bridge that gap between the marketing and technical side of things. Finally, I have changed my thought process

there.

What advice would you give women looking to get into the industry?

Like Fran said, don't be afraid of taking your seat at the table. I really liked Lean In, the book by Sheryl Sandberg, the former COO of Facebook. I liked how she said that if you have something to offer, don't be afraid to be yourself; be confident in the knowledge that you have something to say, and that people will listen. That's still quite hard to do, though it becomes easier as you move up. Just be yourself, try and sit at the table. Don't be afraid! You have something to offer.

What advice would you give your younger self?

Have the confidence and go and get what is there for you. I always believe in getting out of your comfort zone, too. I don't like to stick to one thing, I get bored quickly. Just do it, because that's where you're going to get the exposure and growth – out of your comfort zone, not sticking to what you know. Challenge yourself!

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