I Am a Systems Engineer and I Do...

Laura Shrieves

Why did you choose to be a systems engineer?

I wouldn't say it was a conscious choice to start with, I was happy as a graduate software engineer in Thales, but I have always wanted to understand the context and the user's point of view in the work I did. It was a natural progression for me to move into Systems, and I've never looked back. Systems is an expansive discipline and I've been lucky enough to gain some great experience in aerospace, encryption and other sectors.

Some people believe you cannot be involved in Systems Engineering until you have experience, and therefore you can only become a systems engineer when you are older, do you agree?

I don't agree with this at all. There are some domain-specific specialisms that come with experience, and
therefore with age, but I think that there are valuable systems skills, such as visualising and creative problem solving that contribute to Systems Engineering that don't require years of experience. These skills are often learnt at primary school and then lost through our reductionist secondary education system. Thales has a number of very talented graduate systems engineers who are making a positive difference to the projects they are involved in.

Education and Qualifications?

I have a BSc in Computer Science and an MSc in Human Centred Computer Systems, so by education or qualification, I'm not an engineer at all! I started work as a graduate software engineer, but soon realised that I had an aptitude for Systems. There are a number of important skills and behaviours that are apparent in good systems engineers, such as effective communication skills and holistic thinking, which women tend to have a natural aptitude for. I have met systems engineers with a wide variety of backgrounds, including Physics, Civil Engineering and Electronics.

What has been the most exciting project you have been involved in since becoming a Systems Engineer?

That is a tough question as I have been involved with a lot of different, exciting projects over the years, but if I had to pick one it would be Watchkeeper, the new unmanned aerial vehicle for the British Army, which was the first project I worked on at Thales. I had the opportunity to work directly with the users, which resulted in delivering a solution that was useful and usable.

What advice would I give to a younger systems engineer?

1. Try and get as many different experiences as you can, chances are you will really enjoy one of them and take it from there.

2. Say 'yes' to as much as you can – the working groups and extra activities that I am involved in help develop a very different set of skills and can be very rewarding.

3. Have fun – how you approach your work makes a massive difference, you spend such a large percentage of your life working, it should be fun!