

Women on top at Topline



Hayley Messer

It is five years since Joanne Churchill joined the small and exclusive group of women running their own industrial companies. In that time, she has turned Topline Glass & Glazing of Ilton, near Ilminster in Somerset, into one of the leading manufacturers of insulating glass units in southern England. Joanne has just pulled off a major coup by recruiting Hayley Messer to run the sales office and take charge of administration.

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Hayley Messer has joined from a rival company just a few miles away and has all the experience Joanne Churchill needs to support her in running the business. Churchill says: "I had taken Topline as far as I could without someone to share the day to day management. Hayley knows the insulating glass business in our region and how to take care of customers. So we have two women running what I believe is one of the best operations in the business."

As the company moves towards becoming pre-eminent in the south west and central southern England regions, results show that this is no idle boast. Now located in a brand new, purpose built factory, with all new equipment and machinery, production is running at around 2,500 ig units per week and Topline's commitment to excellence and future growth is demonstrated by the recent accreditation to BS EN 1279 Kitemark.

Although there is a number of sources for advice on Kitemark, Topline wanted guidance from an independent, qualified and experienced consultant with no commercial axe to grind. Dave Frost of CEN Solutions was introduced by another supplier and he explained the requirements of Kitemark and EN 1279 accreditation. Having been commissioned by Topline to manage the Kitemark project, he was able to advise on procedures and processes and attended every stage of the testing and evaluation programme. Crucially, he was able to interpret the test results, so that Churchill and her team understood clearly how to continue getting it right first time, every time. The Kitemark was won at the first attempt.

Joanne Churchill is highly appreciative of the strong and constructive support from major suppliers like Pilkington and CEN

Solutions. "When we were planning the layout of the new factory, Pilkington took us to see several other ig companies to help us decide how we wanted to arrange things. Dave Frost of CEN Solutions has been a tremendous help in managing our Kitemark project and advising on manufacturing techniques and processes."

She was working for Topline when the husband of the married couple who owned the business died eight years ago. Three years later, the opportunity arose to buy the business from the widow who wanted to sell up. Churchill recalls: "We took over a decrepit building, antiquated equipment and a clapped-out van. Output was never more than 100 units per day and the state of the building was so poor that we had guttering inside to catch the rain and the company cat was a vital member of the team, to keep the rats at bay."

What gave her new enterprise a firm foundation was the unwavering loyalty of the six skilled employees to their new boss and the active support of her husband Graham, who also has his own business to run.

Land was bought on the Conquest Business Park for the new factory and glass storage buildings, with more land to spare for future development. A third building is already being planned and a toughening plant is a possible future investment. Staff numbers have trebled to 18 and the plant is a model of cleanliness and efficiency. Order throughput is computer controlled to ensure no bottlenecks at any stage of the process and deliveries are made by a fleet of three smart new vans and a lorry.

"We never forget the basics," says Joanne. "We are growing and we are successful, but that is only because we still act as a team and we look after all our customers, large and small." ■