

# 20 to Watch: Women in HVAC - Stefanie Kopchick

NEWS RELEASE BY THE CHEMOURS COMPANY

Northampton, MA | February 11, 2022 08:45 AM Eastern Standard Time



**Name:** Stefanie Kopchick **Title:** Global Market Manager, Opteon Stationary Refrigerants **Age:** 38 **Educational Experience:** Bachelor's Degree in Chemical Engineering with a Minor in Materials Science, Princeton University **Professional Credentials/Accreditations:** Six Sigma Black Belt

## **What caused you to/when did you fall in love with engineering?**

Growing up, I gravitated toward math and science subjects and thought for many years I would be a teacher or doctor because I wanted to help people. Once I got into college and started learning about all of the potential career paths for engineers, I quickly realized there were so many ways I could help make a difference in people's lives as an engineer. I got excited about working in teams to solve complex problems and make new materials or improve on existing products to address the growing needs we have in our world. In school, I appreciated the opportunity to interact with many engineers who were able to take their career paths in so many different directions, using their education

as their foundation to help them think about, analyze, and improve the world around them.

### **What has been the most rewarding aspect of working in the skilled trades?**

The most rewarding aspect of my work in the HVACR industry across multiple roles has been having the opportunity to support and learn from the amazing mechanical contractors, design engineers, OEMs, wholesalers, and end-users around the world as we work together to transition the industry to more environmentally sustainable refrigerant solutions that help address the challenges of climate change.

More broadly, beyond refrigerants and the HVACR industry, I love that I've had the opportunity to use the skills I gained through my engineering education to work in manufacturing, operations, technical service, product management, and marketing. Throughout my career journey thus far, with my engineering training as my educational foundation and my passion for people as my guide, I have found it rewarding to remain focused on identifying ways to bring new or improved products to market and make a positive impact on the teams I work with, the customers we work for, and the world we live in.

### **Describe the proudest moment in your career.**

While I don't have a single moment that stands out, each time I've had the opportunity to work with a customer on a new product evaluation or qualification that leads to commercial adoption, I reflect back on that experience with pride and humility. It's humbling when customers and/or development partners put their trust in our Chemours team to help them along their product road maps to more sustainable solutions for our industry.

### **What challenges do women face in this profession? Can you give a personal example? Why aren't there more women in engineering? How can we increase the number of women in engineering?**

I don't think there is one single answer or solution to the question of why there aren't more women in engineering, but I can share a personal story and give some examples of how I think we can make progress as an industry in this area.

From my personal perspective, I will never forget what my mom shared with me when I was a young girl about her own education and career path. My mom was an architect, focused on structural design, who later went on to get her business degree and then decided, with my dad, that she wanted to stay home to focus on her family and raise me and my brother. She liked math and wanted to go into engineering when she was in college. But her older brother told her there were no women in engineering, so she

couldn't study that, but that there were a few women in the school of architecture, so she should go there to study.

For obvious reasons, this story still bothers me today, and while I know my mom was never bitter or upset about her career path and life, I'm sure this helped motivate me to want to prove I could do whatever I made up my mind to do. I'd like to believe and hope that young women today are not being told by family or acquaintances that engineering isn't a suitable profession for them, but I can imagine there may still be areas where this perception remains. Unfortunately, negative misperceptions about industry, chemicals, and science can intentionally or unintentionally/subtly be passed along to younger generations if we aren't careful.

So, what do we do about it? As I said, there are many facets to solving this challenge, but I'll address just two of them briefly. First, I think outreach to young girls in school is so important. They need to see, experience, and understand the opportunities engineering can create and connect that to how they can make a difference in the lives of others. And, second, as young women get into their engineering careers, it's extremely helpful to have other women mentors who can help coach and provide both professional and personal testimonials of how they have navigated through different moments in their career and family lives.

### **What does your day-to-day job entail?**

In my role as global market manager for our stationary refrigerants business in Chemours, I work closely with my colleagues around the world in marketing, sales, business development, and technology to develop and commercialize new, more environmentally sustainable refrigerants into the HVACR industry. This involves meetings, conference calls, customer visits, etc., as we evaluate our solutions and work with partners. I also work with my team to create new tools and content that can help educate all of the various stakeholders in our industry on the properties and performance of the refrigerants and the regulatory landscape and help them make informed product selection decisions.

### **What drives/motivates you every day?**

Knowing the Opteon refrigerants I'm working on each day with my colleagues around the world are helping customers achieve both environmental and economic sustainability, and that they are enabling a smooth transition for our HVACR industry away from high global-warming-potential refrigerants, is incredibly motivating.

### **How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted you personally and professionally?**

One of the interesting aspects and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic is the blurring of the lines of personal and professional lives. There have been benefits and drawbacks to this blurry “new normal.”

Of course, working from home while educating children and juggling child care from home, as so many have had to do throughout the various stages of this pandemic, has not always been easy. I consider myself fortunate that I've been able to continue my job by working remotely from my home, and my employer has a “flex your day” policy that provides me with the opportunity to accommodate personal situations when necessary. I also treasure the fact that because I was not having to travel, I could take some time during lunch to come out of my home office, see my younger son, and put him down for his afternoon nap.

Over time, though, I did learn that I needed to set more boundaries for myself in starting/ending the workday to try to do a better job balancing time with my family versus professional work. I shared that plan with some of my colleagues and my husband so they could help hold me accountable to my goals.

**What remains on your engineering bucket list – what do you aspire to do that you haven't accomplished yet?**

Honestly, I have never maintained a specific “engineering bucket list.” As I described in earlier responses, my primary goal for any role I have is to focus on people and making a positive impact on the lives of others. By using this goal as my guide, I'm confident that no matter what role or function I am in, I will continue to learn from others and contribute to our industry and world in meaningful ways!

**What's one thing no one knows about you?**

One of my favorite vacation spots and activities is rock hunting on the shores of Lake Michigan, where you can find a unique fossilized coral called a Petoskey stone. I love searching for the Petoskey stones and then polishing them to reveal the beautiful and unique fossil.

**List any mentors who've helped you succeed and describe exactly how they've shaped your success.**

I consider both my mom and dad to be my greatest mentors, as they reinforced with me at an early age that I didn't have to conform to any mold that someone had predetermined for me. They encouraged me to do my best and sacrificed so much for our family so that I would not be limited in what I thought was possible.

Beyond my parents, I credit my freshman year college materials chemistry professor, Robert Cava, for instilling in me the passion and curiosity for chemistry and materials science. I learned so much from professor Cava academically, but what remains most ingrained in my memory is his energy for scientific exploration, passion for teaching others, and humility about what he had accomplished in his own career.

Finally, professionally, I have been fortunate to have several mentors in my career – too many to list. Each has inspired me and has been a sounding board to help me develop in my job while navigating motherhood and career transitions.

### **What advice do you have for prospective female engineers considering entering the field?**

If you are curious, have a passion for helping others, and want to keep career paths and doors open to you in the future, I encourage you to consider engineering. Engineering provides you with the critical thinking skills needed to tackle some of the greatest challenges of our time. Don't hesitate to reach out and talk to engineers to get their perspective while also keeping in mind that there are so many types of jobs that engineers can do. One specific example is not necessarily representative of what all engineers do.

Finally, make sure you study subjects outside of science and math that interest you. To be a successful engineer, it's critical to have good writing and communication skills, as working well with teams is important. It's also valuable to have informed opinions on a variety of other topics beyond the core engineering subjects.

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