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2019 Women in Construction: Deb Colbert, Senior Project Manager at Hancock Associates

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How many years have you been in your current field? I have been in engineering for over 20 years. I started out as an engineering construction inspector, then moved to civil/site design. I raised three fabulous children and then became a regional sales engineer in high density polyethylene pipe (hdpe) and underground stormwater detention/infiltration systems which involved sales calls but also construction start-up and oversight. I joined Hancock Associates just over six months ago as a senior project manager.

What were your biggest fears when you started out in your profession? I wouldn't say I had any really big fears. I worried about being taken seriously as a good looking smart female engineer. I know some women, not just engineers, who become a little edgy to create this tough image working in a predominantly male world. I didn't want to change my personality. So I didn't. I have felt respected in my field for at least 90% of the time. The other 10%, although shocking, does not matter.

Which project, deal or transaction was the "game changer" in the advancement of your career during the last 10 years? I recently joined Hancock Associates and this has been my best career decision in the last 10 years. I have always loved engineering. I took some time off to raise my three wonderful children and in 2008, when I was ready to re-enter the workforce, engineering firms were not hiring. I worked as a Sales Engineer for 10 years and knew that someday I would be back to engineering. A few years ago, I worked on a project at St. John's Preparatory School where I met Vaclav Talacko, P.E., with Hancock. This project was the "Game Changer." He had designed an infiltration system which I sold to the contractor. It was at the construction site where we started our relationship. So when I reached out to Hancock, Vaclav put in a good word for me! I am extremely happy here.

What are you doing differently in 2019 that has had a positive impact on your career? Through my background in Sales, in 2019, I hope to bring in more clientele by attending more trade shows and various meetings. In 2018, I attended the ABX show in Boston and I have already had contact with various potential clients. Here in the Danvers office, we have another Project Manager, Katie Cruz, P.E., LEED AP, who has a great deal of experience in both engineering and construction. Between Katie and me, we plan to grow the Danvers office. We are working towards developing a stronger TEAM environment by teaching the younger engineers to take on more Project Management responsibilities and to learn new skills. I feel that this will have a positive impact on everyone in the office.

What was your first job and what did you learn from it? I worked as the construction inspector on a gravity sewer project in Cumberland, Maine. I learned that details are very important in design; however, in construction, there is always some room for change as long as you use your head. I learned to get dirty. I learned to stand my ground with the contractor. I learned to smile through all the ups and downs of construction work. I learned to deal with being the only female on a very large construction project!

Who are three women – living or dead – that you would like to have drinks with and why?

1. My mother – My mother passed away when I was 38 years old. That was 20 years ago. Since then I have grown exponentially and would love to share my life with her and have deeper life conversations. She was an amazing woman! I know that she would be very proud of me.
2. Oprah – She is such an inspirational and strong woman who encourages all women around the world to improve themselves and improve their lives.
3. Michelle Obama – She has accomplished so much in her life and she was an amazing First Lady who I truly believe was a partner with the President. I would like to speak with her about her career, her life as the First Lady and her views about raising daughters in today's society.

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