

Celebrating Women's History Month: Driving Inspiration - Meet Some of the Women Behind Toyota and Lexus

March 24, 2023



The people behind the products and projects are what make the Toyota and Lexus brands so unique. So, in honor of Women's History Month, we're highlighting a few of the many trailblazers who are helping drive the industry forward while also making a positive impact at the company.

From those who came before them to those who will come after them, these six Toyota and Lexus employees are part of a larger driving force that partially credit their success to believing in themselves and receiving support from mentors.

Some also believe organizations like Women Influencing and Impacting Toyota (WIIT), one of Toyota's business partnering groups (BPGs), play a role by providing opportunities to employees to hear from business leaders, learn best practices on how to handle challenges, and participate in events that celebrate individual and group accomplishments.

Here's to all the employees who help create an environment that fosters diversity and inclusion with hopes to

strengthen connection within the workplace and beyond!



Mastering Problem-Solving

Julie Belcher, a recently promoted Engineer Manager who's worked for Toyota Alabama for 15 years, understands the power of problem-solving and embraces the thrill. In her position, Belcher must be nimble and grasp concepts that require strategic logic and innovative techniques.

"In my previous role as a quality engineer, I learned so much about the powertrain itself, about engines and how they function. Every day I come to work, there is a problem to solve," she says. "Now in my new role as an engineer manager, I get to transfer that knowledge to others."

When asked what women in STEM fields should do to prepare for leadership positions, Belcher suggests seeking out opportunities to network with other women leaders in the industry.

"One of the most beneficial things I've done is attend the Women Influencing Toyota conferences. Through those opportunities, I'm able to get advice from other women leaders and learn from their experiences," she says.

Belcher's passion for championing women in the industry is evident. Just this month, she was named a finalist for Toyota Alabama's WIIT Woman of the Year award.

"As a woman in manufacturing, I feel a responsibility to uplift other women and build an inclusive culture. It's part of my engineering background to help make things better," she says. "Toyota is a company that prioritizes diversity and inclusion, and I love having an avenue to influence others and make a difference."



Passion Fuels Success

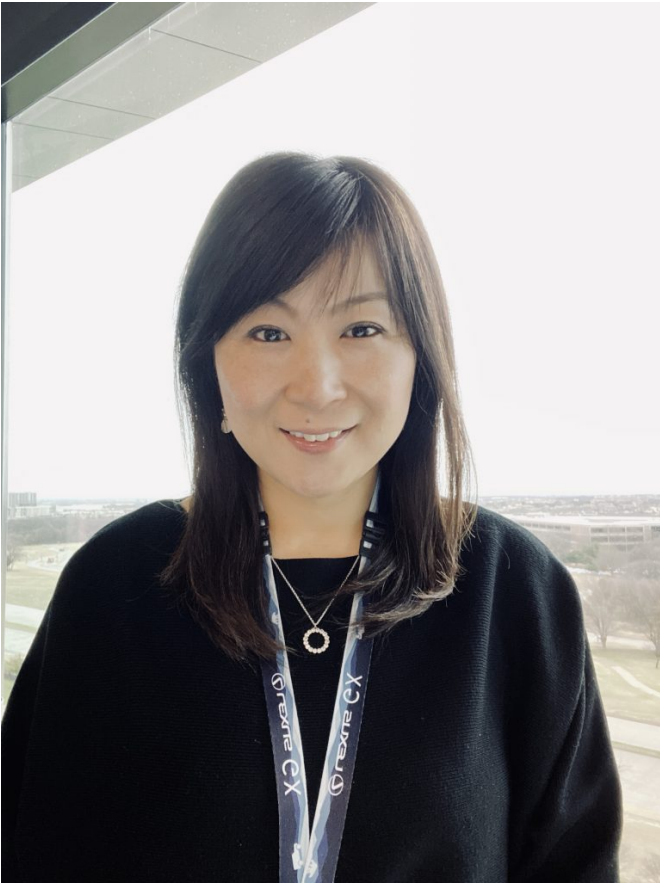
Danielle Graham, an engineering manager at the Production Engineering Manufacturing Center in Georgetown, Kentucky, has worked at Toyota for more than two decades. As a dedicated employee, she knows firsthand that no two days are alike at Toyota.

“I don’t think there is a typical day,” Graham says. “I think the nature of Toyota, in general, is that every day is a little different, which is good. The role that I’m in now is cross-functionally based and I spend most of my time talking between other shops and design.”

Over the years, Graham’s seen more women enter the automotive field, which makes her happy and optimistic. “Overall, it’s good to see more faces that look like me in the engineering space and environment,” she says. “It seems like we’re making an effort to get more women in the field and retain them on an engineering level.”

Graham understands that some women may feel like they fall short or aren’t qualified for specific jobs in the field, but she encourages them to go for it anyway.

“Don’t doubt yourself and don’t feel like you have to have 110% of the qualifications to move forward,” she says. “If you have a passion and desire to go into math or science, robotics or anything in that span, please continue to do it. Don’t think you have to be the math lead to pursue your career in this field. It’s more so based on your passion and desire. Everyone has the capability, especially if they’re passionate about it.”



Nothing Is Impossible

Sakiko Aono, a marketing manager for the Lexus division, is proud to work in an industry where women are advancing and given the tools to succeed.

“I am grateful that our leaders are looking at and celebrating the success of women who continue to have a significant impact on our company,” she says.

Aono knows that longevity at a company can also lead to opportunities.

“After joining Toyota 17 years ago and serving on different teams in Toyota Marketing, Product Planning, Service Parts and Accessories, Lexus still gives me the opportunity to challenge myself with diverse perspectives and unique ideas,” she says. “Lexus, where I work now, is an environment where I can not only do my daily work, but also deepen my thinking one step further. I still feel a sense of freshness and can take on new challenges, and I am grateful to Lexus.”

Aono wants other women to know that to thrive in any industry, self-confidence is paramount.

“Always remember to believe in yourself and have the courage to move forward,” she says. “Because nothing is impossible!”



Building a Strong Support System

Shravanthi Denthumdas, vice president of Engineering, Data and Emerging Technologies at Toyota Connected, has worked with the company for more than five years. Prior to joining Toyota, she was a consultant for various companies, including some in the automotive industry.

“My experience so far has been amazing,” she says. “I’ve grown so much in the company. I’ve had tremendous support from our executives who supported me and helped me grow.”

To pay it forward, Denthumdas and a colleague recently launched the Women in Tech group at Toyota Connected.

“I want every woman in the company to know they have that support circle,” Denthumdas says as to why she helped start the group. “They can come and discuss challenges and gains. They might want mentorship or gender-specific discussions and get ideas. I want to be there to support that.”



Moving the Needle Forward

Growing up with a mother who worked in the medical field, Linda Hung’s passion for STEM started at a young age.

“I’ve always been drawn to STEM-related subjects,” she says. “My mother has been a consistent role model in this area — she is a doctor two times over as an MD and a Ph.D. During my undergrad at UC Berkeley, I double majored in applied math and chemistry. I chose math because I loved how theorems can be proved just once — and the proof will continue to hold throughout time — and chemistry because I could see how theory connects to the real world.”

That hunger for STEM-related subjects led her to Toyota, where she works as a manager in the Energy & Materials (E&M) division at Toyota Research Institute (TRI). Her team focuses on conducting research and building tools that integrate machine learning, artificial intelligence and automation tools with materials science expertise — targeting the development of new batteries and fuel cells that help advance Toyota’s carbon neutrality goals.

Prior to joining TRI, Hung found it challenging to find the right job that blended her desire to work on tech projects that enhanced people’s everyday lives.

“It was sometimes difficult to connect my work to technology improvements in our daily lives,” she says. “What drew me to TRI is the connection of research to real-world Toyota products, as well as how we incorporate data science and machine learning with more traditional modes of materials research.”

Hung believes that in order to achieve optimal success in any industry, diversity of thought must flourish.

“Anytime a certain field lacks diversity, it’s harder to develop the variety of ideas and the constructive discussions that can drive innovation,” she says. “Women can bring new perspectives on what the most important research directions are and how to study these questions.”



Teamwork is Essential

Janelle Pharris, who is approaching six years with Toyota, is excited about her position on the Product and Sales Education team. She says teamwork and building relationships with other departments are essential in getting the job done.

“In marketing, collaboration is key — so, many days I am in and out of meetings with stakeholders from all across the company and with our external vendor partners,” she says. “Our goal is to provide accurate assets, just in time, as the vehicles and technology are launching.”

Juggling all those moving parts is par for the course for Pharris, who is also a mother of two.

“Being a woman in the automotive field has had its challenges for sure, but I wouldn’t change it for a thing. It has forced me to grow and develop in ways that I may not have without those experiences and interactions, all while leveraging what came naturally,” she says.

When thinking about her career and other women's accomplishments, Pharris says "As a woman, I can add that unique perspective and insight on projects and strategic direction to create a more inclusive and comprehensive outcome. I'm aware that I walk in the footsteps of many powerful women who came before me. I feel it's now my responsibility to help pave the way for other young women."