

# Agnès

**President & CEO** of Europe, Russia,  
Central Asia and Israel at GE Grid Solutions

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Interview with **Agnès Théodoule**



# Théodule

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When you break some of the initial barriers, then very quickly you start getting the benefits of being a woman in this role.



**Building a Meaningful Career  
in the Power Systems Industry**

**In this interview one of the founders of Women in Power Systems, Petra Curlin, spoke to Agnès Théodule, one of the great women in the power systems industry who spent her entire career climbing the professional ladder within one company that provided support and opportunities for her professional growth. Have the times changed over the years? In this interview, Agnès shares her personal story and invaluable professional advice for all women and younger generations entering the industry of power systems.**

**Petra Curlin:** We are very proud today to have with us one of the first female leaders to support WPS and share her stories with us, Agnès Théodule, President and CEO of Europe, Russia, Central Asia and Israel at GE Grid Solutions. Welcome Agnès.

Agnès is a mother of two and she loves the mountains. She is currently in lockdown in the French Alps, is that right Agnès?

**Agnès Théodule:** Thank you, Petra. You are quite right. I am stuck in the Alps and now I will have to ski each weekend for six weeks (laughs).

**PC** Agnès, you are a leader in one of the biggest global companies in the power industry. Could you share with us what first inspired you to start your career in the power systems? Tell us something about the beginnings of your career.

**AT** What appealed to me to choose power generation and transmission industry was the fact that these facilities are present in all countries and they serve the basic needs of any population. This global aspect was of great interest to me, knowing that I will meet with customers from anywhere in the world. The second important element was the diversity of the technologies and science that are integrated in the power system. You have everything from pure mechanical science to electrical, thermal and software engineering. These were the two main drivers for me.

**PC** I can imagine you saw a lot of change of technology over your career. What was the biggest challenge that you faced during your career?

**AT** I had no real career plan, and my professional growth was essentially driven by the needs of the position I occupied

at the time. I was very lucky because I was often offered new opportunities for career growth within my company. This provided an opportunity for me to advance from a project manager and sales engineer roles to an area manager in the substation business, followed by sales vice president in the power transformer business and various global roles that I held afterwards. The downside of this trend was that in the first 12 years of my career, I was in an organization which was very static. On two occasions I felt I was reaching my comfort zone and I expected to be more challenged in my roles.

Thinking about my next steps, I realized that I had to be more proactive in order to be presented with the opportunity. So, I did this the second time. I felt I was reaching my comfort zone and I openly expressed that I would like to progress and do something else. I was immediately offered a new job in the power transformer business. So, the difficulty I faced was feeling too anchored in current circumstances, and not looking forward enough.

**PC** That is amazing. I don't know how many people would actually accept so many new challenges. You say when you advanced in your career, it all progressed pretty naturally. One thing that I am really interested in is the attitude of your colleagues at the beginning of your career, and how it changed over time. We know the power industry is traditionally a man's world, so what was the support from your male colleagues like?

**AT** When I started my first job, I was the first new engineer in a new recruitment wave in the company, which happened five years after the previous wave of recruitment. They recruited five to ten new engineers at that time. When I joined, there was nobody of my age, and there were only men who were hired five years before. But I enjoyed full respect from my colleagues, both from younger ones,

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and those in the hierarchy - from my direct manager to the higher-level managers. I did feel a bit under scrutiny because I was the only female. I felt I had to demonstrate a bit more than if I were a man, but that was it.

There was something interesting, however - when they talked to me they would use the *vous\**, which is a sign of respect. I noticed they didn't use it among themselves, only with me. So, I forced them to have the same direct interaction with me as they would among themselves.

Over the years, I became more visible in the organization because I was often the only female. Maybe I had to demonstrate certain

capabilities more when I entered the power transformer world because I was a woman, but again, I think it was generally a positive welcome.

In my career, I worked a lot in Asia, the Middle East and in Africa. I was in charge of the Africa - Middle East region in some key activities, and I could really recognize the full respect from my male colleagues in those countries. Same with the customers. In certain areas, the customers were only men, there were no women.

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\* Plural of the French personal pronoun *tu* - "you"; used as a sign of respect when addressing someone older than yourself and/or a less familiar acquaintance.

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I remember a case when we celebrated an HVDC contract in India and there was a big ceremony. There were around 100 people present and I was the only female in the room.

I really can't say I ever had a bad experience. I don't say that it is always the case, but globally, I think this is an industry which welcomed women

even at that time when there were fewer women in the industry. And I see a significant change now.

I would also like to share one event when I just had my second child and I decided to work part time, only four days a week. I had some feedback at that time that I was being considered for a

promotion, but working part time was not that well received by some of the managing directors, so the promotion didn't happen. However, the next time, a few years later when I repeated this part-time work with the new boss, who was, let's say, from a new generation and fully understood that I could achieve my work with the right organization and team, this was achievable. I could delegate to the right people, and obviously I was available in case of emergency any time when needed. So, even this is possible for women if the organization supports it.

**PC** You mentioned in a conversation we had earlier that while it is more difficult for women to prove themselves in the power transformer industry, later it is actually an advantage, and you get respect once you have earned it. Could you comment on that a little bit?

**AT** Once you become more visible and appreciated, with time you get even more appreciated. I guess the feelings are a bit inflated when it comes to dealing with a woman compared to a male in the industry. When you break some of the initial barriers that you might encounter during the first interaction with either your colleagues or customers, then very quickly you take that as a benefit and you feel that being a woman in this role is more of an advantage than a disadvantage.

**PC** What advice would you give to the younger generation starting their career in the power industry? How can they bridge this first gap? How can they break the ice? In my experience, although women have some more prominent positions in the industry now, they are still the minority. And often a woman will find herself as the only female among her male colleagues.

**AT** The first advice I would give is to join this business. Because today, this business is much more exciting than in my early days. In fact, back then T&D was a very traditional business with not so much innovation going on. And today it is quite the opposite. Today, the main challenges come from the integration of renewable energy obtained from very large, concentrated offshore wind farms, to the distributed energy through the rooftop solar panel on your house. This change in the production of electricity induces a huge change in the transmission. It is a technical change, but also it is a change in business models and in regulations of transmitting this energy.

All these challenges open a huge space for innovation, and the pace of this business has completely changed. The time constant was very long and now it is accelerating. We are really moving from a conservative industry - which,

while it was conservative, was still very interesting - to a very innovative industry. There is also a new carbon-free technology being developed, which is key for the future, for environmental reasons and for the safety of our workers.

Then, when it comes to more personal behavior and acumen, I think it is very important to be direct and to break down the barriers that sometimes can be placed in front of you. Just be simple and like in the example I gave, don't accept that they speak to you using *vous* when they don't use it among themselves.

**PC** "No *vous* - I am not old, please!"

**AT** Exactly! But this probably wouldn't happen today as we are generally more relaxed and direct in communication. But we could translate this example to other kinds of barriers which could still be there today. Don't accept it. Be straightforward.

And what I often notice - women are generally more straightforward in the workplace. This facilitates the relationships they build.

Another advice I would give is to be more proactive than what I had been myself. It is good to be focused on your current job, but you also need to look forward to more and see new opportunities. And then be more proactive when those opportunities come so you can take them.

**PC** What would you say was the proudest moment in your career that you would like to share?

**AT** I joined the power transformer business in 2003 as a deputy sales VP. And then one year later, I was appointed the sales VP. At that time, we had €320 million activity worldwide and operated eight factories over five continents. We were present everywhere, but we faced huge difficulties because the market was very depressed.

In 2005 and 2006, the market started to increase drastically. What I am proud of is that we managed to seize the opportunity to increase our volume, but also our market share in this period. In fact, we very quickly managed to turn this into a profitable business, before it was losing money. We jumped on the wave, and made it even better than the wave was, also managing customer expectations. At the time we were moving from a buyer's market to a seller's market. We needed to maximize customer satisfaction and try to find a solution for them to get our product as it became very scarce on the market. In fact, we were selling

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pre-booked slots in the factory in order for them to reserve the slot.

This was also very interesting from the sales perspective. I had to develop the sales capability when I could have been in an easy position. And I didn't want to benefit from this easy position. I wanted to continue to develop the long-term relation with our customers and justify their trust and confidence in the fact that we will always find a solution for them. I am quite proud of what we managed to do, knowing that in my last year, in 2009, we had the volume of orders of more than €1,050,000,000. At that time we had three more factories worldwide, 11 in total.

So, from the sales aspect, you need to be able to deliver in order to maintain the long-term relationship and long-term presence with your customer. And to do this, you need their confidence and you need to be there when life is not so easy for them. In my career, I worked

with customers whose countries were at war, either civil war or otherwise. And still, they need your support and your equipment. Sometimes you need to find an innovative solution to continue to serve them. And then you earn their loyalty, which is very powerful and important to keep and develop your customer base.

**PC** Thank you, Agnès. This is extremely inspiring for anyone considering a profession in the power industry and, like you said, there are so many possibilities. I loved what you said - that the industry was exciting back then, but that it is even more exciting and offers even more possibilities today when we have renewables, a lot of new digital technologies and many other opportunities. Thank you very much for this insight and knowledge.

**AT** Thank you for the opportunity.