

WOMEN IN FREIGHT

Feature by Liesl Venter

Support structures vital for career building

Retention, rather than recruitment, has become the real battle for women in logistics.

Although it is becoming easier for women to enter the sector, the greater challenge begins once they are inside – ensuring they are supported, developed and able to progress without being worn down by inflexible working arrangements, unconscious bias and the competing demands of work and family.

“The real battlefield isn’t recruitment; it’s retention and development,” said Shevon Kotiah, demand manager for sales at Heineken Beverages SA and brand ambassador for the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport South Africa (CILTSA).

She described the challenge as the “quiet, exhausting friction” that arises when ambition collides with outdated corporate cultures, family responsibilities and the invisible weight of unconscious bias.

Kotiah said it was important to

note, however, that meaningful progress had already been made in attracting more women to the transport, logistics and supply chain sector. At the same time, the traditional “boys’ club” was slowly being dismantled, while a younger generation of leaders was creating a more inclusive working environment.

Increasingly, men were also becoming active allies, serving as mentors and sponsors and helping female colleagues make their voices heard.

“For decades, the conversation focused on getting women through the front door. We celebrated entry and counted how many seats there were at the table,” she said. “Now it is no longer just about having a seat at the table, but having a voice at the table.”

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The traditional ‘boys’ club’ is slowly being dismantled, while a younger generation of leaders is creating a more inclusive working environment.

– SHEVON KOTIAH

This shift is important not only for women but also for the competitiveness of the logistics sector. Kotiah said diverse leadership teams brought different perspectives to decision-

making and strengthened collaboration and risk management during supply chain disruptions.

She said many private-sector companies had become far more intentional about developing women, with mentorship initiatives, employee-support programmes

and dedicated networks continuing throughout the year rather than being confined to Women’s Month.

The next step is to ensure that this progress translates into sustainable careers. The demanding, round-the-clock nature of logistics, combined with family responsibilities and

lingering unconscious bias, could still make advancement difficult.

Flexible working models, mentorship and supportive professional networks could help women manage these pressures and prepare for leadership opportunities.

“To keep women in this vital industry, we have to create the support structures that allow them to build sustainable careers. Without that support, women may find the demands of a 24/7, crisis-driven industry increasingly difficult to manage.”

Kotiah said, however, that responsibility for progress did not rest with employers alone. Women also needed to advocate for themselves, build their knowledge, develop professional networks and take ownership of their career paths.

“The system must change, but you also cannot wait for it to be perfect before you decide to be powerful. You are not a passenger; you are the driver of your own career.” LV

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Women in Freight

Learning and development a key focus

At Leschaco, creating an environment in which women can thrive is embedded in the company's culture.

According to customer service manager Ilonka Laurens, the company does not rely on specific programmes focused solely on advancing women. Instead, its ability to support and empower women stems naturally from organisational values that are reflected in the way employees work every day.

Laurens said Leschaco's commitment to appointing the best person for each position, combined with the specialised nature of the logistics industry and an emphasis on competence and cultural fit, had

resulted in a diverse team of skilled professionals.

"It is an environment that encourages accountability, continuous improvement and excellence," she told *Freight News*. "We actively challenge and support each other, continually sharpening our skills and expertise."

Learning and development are also central to the company's approach.

Leschaco has a dedicated learning platform that gives employees ongoing opportunities to expand their skills and develop professionally.

According to Laurens, increasing numbers of women are being drawn to the organisation not only by the career opportunities it offers, but also by its strong culture and track record as a business.

While considerable progress has been made, she believes women's achievements could be recognised more

widely across industries.

"Within the logistics sector, I have seen women recognised and valued, particularly in leadership roles, which is encouraging. I would love to see the same level of recognition and celebration extended across other sectors."

Her advice to young women considering a career in logistics is to invest in their education, embrace every opportunity to learn and remain confident in their abilities.

"There is absolutely a place for women in this industry and there are tremendous opportunities to build a successful and rewarding career. Never allow obstacles or setbacks to stand in the way of your ambitions. The industry needs talented women and there is no limit to what you can achieve." LV



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Never allow obstacles or setbacks to stand in the way of your ambitions.

– ILONKA LAURENS

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AI bias threatens gender gains in supply chains

Artificial intelligence could reverse hard-won gains in gender diversity if supply chain organisations fail to address bias in the data used to train and operate AI systems.

According to supply chain industry body SAPICS, a study of 133 AI systems found that 44% demonstrated clear gender bias. Large language models repeatedly associated women with domesticity and childcare while linking men to business, leadership and career success.

UN Women also found that when researchers asked large language models to complete a sentence beginning with a person's gender, about one in five responses was sexist or misogynistic.

“While AI itself isn't biased, it's a mirror. When trained on historical data, AI tools reflect the gender prejudices that already exist. It's the classic rule of supply chain: garbage in, garbage out. If left unchecked, AI won't just mirror past inequities, it will amplify and accelerate them at scale,” warned SAPICS.

The organisation hosted a panel discussion on Women in Supply Chain Leadership at its conference in Cape Town, where speakers explained that recruitment algorithms often favoured male candidates because they had been trained on decades of historical data reflecting and amplifying existing inequalities.

While algorithms do not create bias, the data used to train them shapes their output. Panellists said the problem could partly be attributed to the fact that women accounted for only 22% of AI and data science professionals.

Considering the extraordinary pace at which AI is being adopted, the technology's potential impact on gender

equality could not be ignored.

AI is becoming integral to modern supply chain operations, including demand forecasting, inventory optimisation, warehouse automation and predictive analytics. However, it could also negatively affect how women enter and progress within the profession.

The panellists agreed that the ultimate risk was that, by overlaying AI onto the existing gender equity landscape, the industry would not merely

stall or fail to make progress but could move backwards.

Supply chain specialist Katrina Tyson, who moderated the panel, emphasised the importance of discussing AI's impact on women in supply chain.

“The true value of AI isn't headcount

or cost reduction, it's elevating and strengthening our existing people. When routine tasks are automated, leaders reclaim their most valuable asset: time to think, reflect and approach complex problems with creativity and nuance,” she said.

“Used intentionally as a thought partner to augment our thinking rather than outsourcing it, AI strengthens existing leaders by pairing deeply human qualities like empathy, intuition and consensus with the scale, speed and power of technology.

“A good AI strategy doesn't look to replace talent, but to give exceptional leaders the space to actually lead. Crucially, that includes ensuring women are actively involved in selecting, testing and evaluating these AI tools to catch hidden biases before they are amplified.” LV



Katrina Tyson

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A good AI strategy doesn't look to replace talent, but to give exceptional leaders the space to actually lead.

– KATRINA TYSON

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Women in Freight

Time to move beyond talk to solutions

Women in logistics need to speak more openly about their experiences and share the practical strategies that have helped them navigate demanding careers, according to Shevon Kotiah, brand ambassador for the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport South Africa (CILTSA).

She said conversations about women's empowerment had identified the barriers, but the focus now needed to shift towards how women could overcome them.

"We can hold conferences and continue talking about the challenges, but the important question is how we change things," she said. "Women need spaces where they can connect, speak honestly and learn from one another."

This will be a central focus of CILTSA's fourth Women in Logistics, Transport and Supply Chain Empowerment Conference (WECON 2026), which takes place in Boksburg on September 18.

Held under the theme Resilience Reimagined: Leading Through Disruption, the conference aims to create a space for much-needed dialogue for advancing gender equity.

"South Africa's logistics system faces infrastructure constraints, port bottlenecks, skills shortages, digital transformation and shifting market expectations, placing resilience at the centre of organisational success," said Kotiah. "WECON 2026 offers a

focused space for women to build the insight, networks and confidence needed to lead through these conditions and shape more competitive industries."

Speaking to *Freight News*, Kotiah said women often asked her how she managed the competing demands of

career, travel and family life. Such questions demonstrated the importance of creating environments where women feel comfortable, admitting that they do not always have everything under control.

"It is okay to say that you are not managing. You are not the only person who feels that way. When women begin talking honestly, we can start sharing how we have dealt with these situations and help one another find practical solutions."

These solutions could include establishing support networks, finding mentors and learning to distinguish between responsibilities that could be postponed and those that require immediate attention.

Women account for only around 28% of South Africa's

transport and logistics workforce, while just over 4% of commercial truck drivers in road freight are women. Reports cited by the Vaal University of Technology indicate that women hold fewer than one in four senior leadership positions in the transport and logistics sectors.

Statistics South Africa's wider transport research shows that the share of black African women holding a driver's licence rose from 9.6% in 2013 to 13.4% in 2020. These figures signal progress in participation alongside an urgent need to widen access to technical roles, business ownership, professional advancement and executive leadership.

Kotiah said women should move away from the belief that there were only a limited number of opportunities available to them. This perception could create competition when collaboration would be far more effective. LV

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This is not about men versus women, but about how we coexist within the same ecosystem and work together.

— SHEVON KOTIAH



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Broad transformation in legal profession

Women now make up the majority of partners at Shepstone & Wylie Attorneys, with many occupying senior leadership positions – a sign of the growing influence of women within South Africa's legal profession and the specialised field of maritime and logistics law.

According to Taryn Hunkin, a partner in shipping logistics, which includes customs and trade, the firm actively encourages women to pursue their professional ambitions and continue developing their expertise.

This support includes access to training and professional education, as well as opportunities to engage more closely with the industries they serve.

Female attorneys are also encouraged to participate in professional associations and industry networks such as the Women's International Shipping & Trading Association (WISTA) and the Maritime Law Association (MLA).

"These platforms provide valuable opportunities to build professional networks, share knowledge, gain industry insights and engage with like-minded women making meaningful contributions within the maritime, shipping and logistics sectors," she said.

Women gain ground in legal leadership

The progress achieved within the firm reflects a broader transformation taking place in South Africa's legal profession. The number of female practising attorneys has steadily increased, while women's representation

within the judiciary has also grown.

The appointment of Justice Mandisa Maya as South Africa's first woman Chief Justice, in September 2024, marked an important milestone and underscored the increasingly prominent role women are playing in leading the country's major legal institutions.

Despite these gains, challenges remained, said Hunkin. While more women are entering the legal profession, significant

barriers to advancement persist and women remain underrepresented at senior levels across the sector.

"Many women still encounter gender bias, with their competence, expertise and experience sometimes questioned by colleagues and clients," she told *Freight News*.

Women also continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of household and caregiving responsibilities. Combined with the demands of long working hours and billable targets, this can place them at a disadvantage when seeking to progress within the profession.

"Our firm recognises that a flexible working environment can help address many of these challenges and numerous women, including those with families, have flourished here. Strong emphasis is placed on a gender-inclusive culture, supported by a work environment that

deals specifically with many of the challenges women face in the industry."

Creating pathways to senior roles

It is a culture that has become central to the firm's ability to attract, develop and retain female talent.

According to Hunkin, the firm's organisational structure and values appeal to women seeking both professional

growth and a workplace in which they can build sustainable, long-term careers.

Once talented employees have been identified, the firm supports their development through mentorship, leadership opportunities,

continuous professional education and external training.

"We actively create pathways for women to take on greater responsibility, develop their leadership capabilities and progress into senior roles," she said, noting that women now headed many of the firm's specialised departments.

Its collaborative and family-oriented culture also enables women to contribute to decision-making and pursue their professional ambitions. Hunkin said this combination of career development, leadership opportunities and workplace support had been instrumental in attracting and retaining female talent.

The results of this approach are increasingly evident in the composition of the firm's leadership.

The firm recently appointed two joint managing partners, one of whom is a woman. Hunkin described the appointment as a meaningful step towards more inclusive leadership and a reflection of the firm's commitment to recognising talent, capability and contribution, irrespective of gender.

Female attorneys are also being given a stronger voice in strategic discussions, client matters and the overall direction of the business.

"The diversity within our leadership team is celebrated, with women recognised for the distinct perspectives, collaborative approach and innovative thinking they bring to the firm," she said.

Another significant milestone was reached this year when Hunkin and two other female attorneys were appointed as profit-sharing partners.

Building the next generation of female leaders

For young women considering a career in maritime, shipping or logistics law, Hunkin's advice is to first understand the sector and explore the different specialisations it offers.

By identifying an area aligned with their interests, strengths and long-term ambitions, she said, women could position themselves for rewarding and sustainable careers.

"The journey can be challenging and requires perseverance, dedication and continuous learning, but the opportunities for personal and professional growth are substantial." LV

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At Shepstone & Wylie, strong emphasis is placed on a gender-inclusive culture, with support for the challenges women face in the industry.

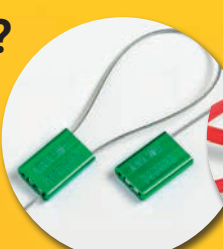
– TARYN HUNKIN





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Ethics underpin a lasting legacy

Few names are as synonymous with freight and logistics recruitment in South Africa as Lee Botti's.

Her connection to the industry – and this publication – runs deep. Her father founded *Freight News* (then called *Freight & Container Weekly*), but Botti went on to build a formidable legacy of her own, establishing a recruitment business that would become a trusted name across the sector. Over the next 49 years, she helped shape careers, supported companies in finding the right talent and witnessed the freight industry transform around her.

This year, Botti closed the agency, bringing to an end an extraordinary chapter spanning almost five decades. *Freight News* features editor Liesl Venter spoke to her about the career she built and the industry that has always been part of her identity.

LV: After almost five decades in freight recruitment, you've decided to close the business. Looking back, what are you most proud of and what do you hope your lasting legacy will be within the logistics industry?

LB: I am most proud of the thousands of careers I helped

launch and the personal growth I witnessed in the candidates we placed. A recruitment business is more than just filling vacancies; it is about trust and the responsibility of changing lives.

Crucially, I instilled a strict policy that my team was never permitted to headhunt from our clients and this fostered an atmosphere of professional integrity, ensuring our relationships were built on long-term partnership rather than short-term gain. I was also blessed to employ amazing staff and managers who helped build the business.

Beyond the boardroom, my heart truly lies in our work with Ithuba. I started this training programme to assist less-privileged school leavers in preparing for the job market, providing them with the skills to enter the working world with confidence. To date, we have trained over 14 000 young people and I am deeply committed to continuing this work well into my retirement. My hope is that my legacy is one of both ethical business practice and the lasting empowerment of the next generation.

LV: You have watched the freight and logistics sector evolve through enormous political, economic and technological change. What have been the biggest transformations you've witnessed and which have had the greatest impact on the people working in the industry?

LB: The sector has shifted from a manual, paper-heavy

environment to a high-speed, tech-driven digital ecosystem. While technological advancements have undoubtedly increased efficiency, the most profound transformation has been the shift in the complexity of the supply chain. Today's logistics professionals know the pace is faster, the pressure is higher and the requirement for continuous upskilling has never been greater.

LV: Your career has been built around people. Having interviewed and placed thousands of professionals over the years, what qualities have consistently separated those who build exceptional careers from those who struggle to progress?

LB: The difference between those who stall and those who soar has always been character rather than just technical skill. Exceptional professionals share three traits: intellectual curiosity, the resilience to navigate the inevitable volatility of freight and unwavering reliability. Those who progress are the ones who show up, take accountability and treat every interaction with genuine respect.

LV: Freight has traditionally been a male-dominated industry, yet you established yourself as one of its most respected figures. How has the role of women changed since you first entered the sector and where do you still see room for progress?

LB: When I started in 1977, women were often viewed

through a narrow lens, rarely seen in senior operational or executive roles. Today, that landscape has shifted significantly. We see women leading logistics firms and directing global supply chains. However, while we have moved past the "token" phase, there is still room for progress in creating truly inclusive corporate cultures that support work-life integration and provide mentorship pathways for young women to reach the boardroom.

LV: Your father was a well-known name in South Africa's logistics industry. How did his influence shape your own career and what did growing up around the industry teach you?

LB: My father founded this publication and that meant that logistics was the heartbeat of our household. He taught me that freight is the invisible pulse of the economy – without it, the world stops. From him, I learned that this industry is built on relationships and information. His influence instilled in me a deep respect for the dignity of hard work and the importance of staying informed, which became the cornerstone of how I ran my own business.

LV: If you could offer one piece of advice to a young woman starting her career in freight and logistics today, what would it be, and why?

LB: Be bold and stay visible. Freight and logistics are not "back-office" industries; they are the frontline of global commerce. Do not wait to be asked for your opinion; understand the operation from the ground up, learn the numbers and cultivate your network relentlessly. Your value lies in your ability to solve problems that others find too daunting – embrace that complexity and you will become indispensable.

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Today's logistics professionals know the pace is faster, the pressure is higher and the requirement for continuous upskilling has never been greater.

– LEE BOTTI



Helping build more resilient leadership pipelines

Freight and logistics is one of the most dynamic and important sectors in the economy, but needs more women at every level.

According to Dr Juliette Fourie, managing director of leadership diagnostics and development company ELEA, women currently account for only around 28% of South Africa's logistics and transport workforce, with even fewer occupying senior leadership positions.

"This highlights a significant gap between participation and influence in the industry," she told *Freight News*.

Fourie said the underrepresentation of women in senior and executive positions remained one of the biggest challenges, along with lingering perceptions that freight and logistics are male-dominated industries. Unequal access to advancement opportunities and difficulties retaining women in workplaces where the culture, flexibility and support structures are inadequate are also of concern.

"These are not abstract issues. Recent South African sector reporting points to a gap between how men and women perceive fairness in advancement and pay, with women far less likely to believe that opportunities and salaries are truly equal."

However, the role of women in the sector has changed significantly in recent years,

with more women moving beyond traditional administrative and support functions into operational, technical, commercial and leadership positions.

"This shift is being recognised more broadly across the country, with industry bodies and thought leaders calling for women to play a far greater

role in rebuilding and modernising logistics," said Fourie. "At ELEA, we see this as both a talent opportunity and a leadership imperative."

The company works with organisations in the freight and logistics

sector to assess leadership capability, identify high-potential individuals and develop targeted competencies. It uses talent data, diagnostics and development programmes to help companies build more resilient leadership pipelines.

ELEA is also a leadership development partner to the Institute of Customs and Freight Forwarding (ICFF), reinforcing its commitment to strengthening leadership capability across the logistics sector.

"At ELEA, we believe that attracting, developing and retaining female talent requires more than isolated HR initiatives. It requires a seamless talent ecosystem in which every stage of the employee journey is connected," said Fourie.

"When attraction, assessment, development, performance,

succession and retention work together, businesses are better able to identify high-potential women early, understand their strengths and development needs, create meaningful leadership pathways and build cultures where women can grow, contribute and stay."

This integrated approach helps organisations move from good intentions to practical implementation by using reliable talent data, focused development interventions and clear leadership pipelines. It ensures that talented women are identified, supported and prepared for the right opportunities at the right time.

A meaningful indication of the impact of this approach can be found in ELEA's internal assessment data. Women represented 43% of the population assessed, compared with 57% men. While this confirmed that a representation gap remained, the development results were encouraging.

Women achieved 722 competency improvements,

demonstrating strong engagement, measurable growth and consistent progression as leaders.

One of the most significant areas of improvement was in "Atoning", a leadership competency associated with accountability, ownership, self-awareness and the ability to build trust.

"This is especially relevant because the future of freight and logistics will require leaders who are not only technically capable, but also emotionally mature, accountable and able to build resilient teams," said Fourie.

She believes the industry's conversation should therefore move beyond representation alone.

"It is not only about leadership titles, but about creating the strategic intent and evidence-based infrastructure required to build high-performing leadership cultures. Through evidence-based measurement, organisations can establish a clear baseline, understand their current capability, identify targeted development priorities and measure progress over time." LV

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28%

Women account for only around 28% of South Africa's logistics and transport workforce.

– DR JULIETTE FOURIE



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Inclusive recruitment opens doors

Women are increasingly moving beyond traditional administrative and sales roles at 4PL to take up positions as truck drivers, warehouse supervisors and managers.

According to Penny Cunliffe, a director at 4PL Cape Group, this reflects a broader change in the role women play across the freight and logistics industry.

“Women have progressed from support functions into leadership and operational roles. They are more visible in decision-making and strategy and are increasingly recognised as mentors across all areas of our business.”

To support this shift, 4PL has expanded the training and mentoring available to women, helping them gain practical experience and develop more specialised knowledge. The company also works with institutions that train women in specific logistics skills, including heavy-vehicle driving.

Inclusive recruitment campaigns are used across all available positions, while

retaining female talent requires more than simply creating employment opportunities.

“We retain women by building a culture based on respect, safety and opportunity,” she said.

Several women at 4PL have

progressed from reception and other entry-level positions into management roles. According to Cunliffe, these career journeys demonstrate what can be achieved when employees are given the opportunity, trust and space

to demonstrate their abilities.

Despite this progress, women entering the industry still face challenges.

“Freight and logistics has historically been male dominated and women often feel that they have to prove their capabilities at

every turn. Safety and respect also remain difficult issues that the industry must address.”

At the same time, widespread skills shortages are creating new opportunities for women, particularly in technical and

specialised fields.

These include compliance and risk management, digital analytics, fleet management systems, customs-clearing processes, telematics, information technology and quality, health, safety and environmental management.

She encouraged women considering

careers in logistics to look beyond broad logistics management qualifications and develop expertise in a particular area.

“The opportunities for women to become involved in logistics are endless. Women are excellent planners and there is significant

potential in areas such as fleet operations, technology, compliance and customs.”

However, she cautioned that the industry required resilience, flexibility and the ability to make decisions under pressure. “Logistics does not sleep.

Anyone entering the industry must understand that it is not always a nine-to-five career. You need to be committed, able to think quickly and be prepared to respond when challenges arise.”

According to Cunliffe, the growing participation of women is already changing the industry by introducing different perspectives and strengthening its focus on customers.

“Women have transformed logistics through leadership, innovation, operational excellence and a customer-centric approach across every level of the supply chain.

Their growing presence continues to strengthen businesses, advance inclusion and shape a more prosperous future for the industry.” LV

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The growing participation of women is already changing the industry by introducing different perspectives and strengthening its focus on customers.

– PENNY CUNLIFFE



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Growing participation in high-level leadership

Women are taking on an increasingly prominent role in South Africa's freight and logistics sector, with several now holding positions that carry considerable influence over national policy, infrastructure, industry reform and skills development.

Representation remains uneven, particularly in technical and operational fields such as trucking, terminal operations, engineering and rail. At leadership level, however, women are making decisions that will have a lasting impact on the performance and direction of the country's logistics system.

Barbara Creecy Minister of Transport

Creecy's portfolio spans South Africa's road, rail, maritime and aviation systems, giving her political oversight of a sector undergoing extensive reform.



A major focus of her tenure has been the restructuring of freight rail. This includes opening the national network to private train operating companies and creating greater scope for private-sector investment and participation.

Michelle Phillips Group Chief Executive, Transnet

Phillips took over at Transnet during one of the most difficult periods in the state-owned company's history. Falling rail volumes, congested ports, ageing equipment, infrastructure constraints and a heavy debt burden had severely affected its performance.

With more than two decades of experience at Transnet, Phillips is leading its operational recovery while overseeing significant changes to the way the organisation operates.



Dr Juanita Maree Chief Executive Officer, Southern African Association of Freight Forwarders

Maree is a prominent industry voice on freight forwarding, customs and trade facilitation issues.

As chief executive of SAAFF, she regularly engages government, Transnet, the South African Revenue Service and other authorities on the challenges affecting cargo owners and logistics companies. Her focus has included port congestion, border delays, customs modernisation, digitalisation and improved visibility across supply chains.



Mesela Nhlapo Chief Executive Officer, African Rail Industry Association

Nhlapo has been closely involved in the debate around the future of South Africa's railways and the role of private operators in



rebuilding the freight network. Through ARIA, she represents companies involved in rail manufacturing, engineering and related services. She has consistently advocated for reforms that will unlock investment, increase rail capacity and create more opportunities for local industry.

Maphefo Anno-Frempong Chief Executive Officer, Transport Education Training Authority

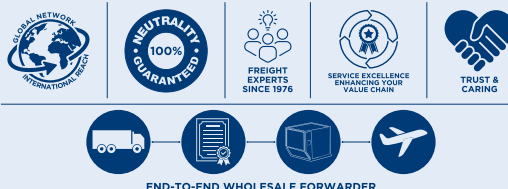
Anno-Frempong oversees skills development in a sector whose requirements are changing rapidly.

Transport and logistics companies need more technical and digital expertise as automation, artificial intelligence and data-led decision-making become part of everyday operations. She is responsible for programmes aimed at preparing workers for these changes while addressing existing shortages across the industry. LV



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