

Driving A Digital (r)Evolution

An interview with Nathalie Maillet Dubois, CEO of Circuit De Spa Francorchamps, an elite Formula 1 racing circuit, on her transition from the world of architecture to motorsport at the leadership level, and building effective teams.



Nathalie Maillet Dubois
Chief Executive Officer
Circuit of Spa Francorchamps

Why did you decide to transition from architecture to leading an elite Formula 1 racing circuit?

This job is at the crossroads of my two passions, motorsport and architecture, so it was a perfect fit. Known as “the most beautiful circuit in the world,” the Circuit is a legendary track on which I myself have driven. It is an exceptional facility and a prestigious showcase on the international stage for motorsport and tourism. The Circuit is a major “economic engine” for the region because any event that takes place within our enclosure has repercussions on the greater economy. The Circuit creates jobs and fully participates in the development of the region. I couldn’t refuse the opportunity when I was contacted as part of the recruitment process.

What was the greatest challenge in making this transition?

I started my role at the height of the season in July, and arrived with an entirely new innovative strategy for making the Circuit “100% connected.” As a driver, motorsport is in my DNA, and being active in the sector has helped a great deal in a smooth transition.

My training as an architect is also an incredible asset for understanding the Circuit and the environmental issues. Keeping abreast of the day-to-day management and implementation of a new strategy have been a real challenge. However, I’ve found my feet quickly and the support and involvement of the team has been an enormous asset!

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How would you describe your leadership style?

I've been in my role since July of 2016. Since then we have worked a lot with the team to put a new strategy in place for the coming seasons. I am surrounded by a motivated team that wishes to always strive for excellence and provide a superior experience for those on and off the track. As I always say, the general public is our boss.

I like to involve my teams in the advancement of a project, so that they feel included in the strategy. Without this, it is impossible. I'm lucky to have a team who love the facility. I love when people come up with proposals and ideas other than mine. The key is placing each person in a position that suits them best - so they can truly flourish. This is how a business changes for the better. Lastly, I believe in the well being of workers. The Circuit trade is not easy, especially during the action-packed peak season where we are faced daily with unexpected events and challenges.

What are the most difficult aspects of being a woman in a leadership role in an industry largely dominated by men?

None, sexism is not a prerogative in motorsport! While it is present in all professional environments, I don't believe I am particularly a victim within my sector. Sexism in sport and in general is an attitude from the past upheld by people who may have difficulty understanding that times have changed. Discrimination must be fought on a day-to-day basis and in all aspects of life. Regarding my appointment, I honestly haven't experienced any sexist reaction. I come from the world of motorsport, I'm a driver and I've won races - so I know what I'm talking about.

What is one piece of advice you would offer an aspiring CEO?

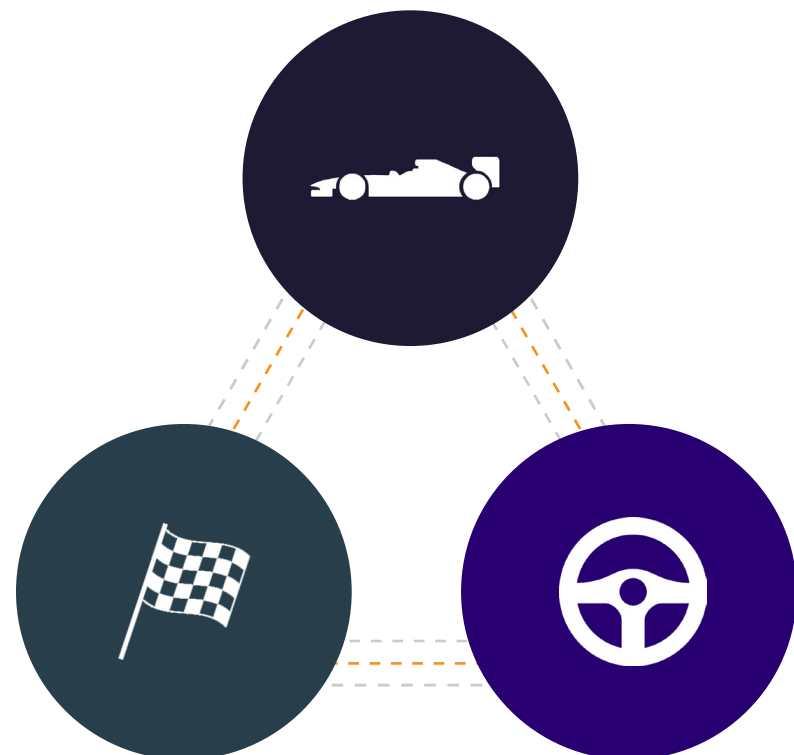
Set ambitious goals, strive for excellence and give yourself and teams the means to achieve them. The only way to anticipate new trends and potential problems is to "get down on the ground" and to be present at the heart of your teams. Be available and always listen to your customers and their wishes. This approach is the basis of any entrepreneurial strategy, because without customers you are nothing. A beautiful product that does not reflect your customers' wishes or needs is still a beautiful product, but it will not sell.

Will you recruit from within the industry/promote from within or do you plan to recruit externally?

We must not live in a closed world. New digital technologies impose this upon us, and these technologies allow us to move forward. The same can be said for talent!



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What is the future for the motorsport and racing industry?

Digital. Motorsports have always been a very innovative sector, but the “digitalisation” of the industry and new technologies significantly alter the landscape. If you cannot keep up with the digital revolution, you will not be able to win the race. That’s the focal point of our new digital strategy for the Circuit.

Motorsport is at a turning point in its history, and our objective is to employ new technologies to strengthen security but also create new experiences for the public. We must also “make sure there’s a show” to bring new races and experiences to the public. We must break through frontiers by providing thrills both on and off the track - this is the Circuit of Spa Francorchamps.

How will you achieve growth for Spa Francorchamps?

We are working toward the development of our calendar “race” but also other track activities. We need to attract new customers and shake things up a little. It must be inventive; we must broaden our client base whilst being attentive to our current clients who have contributed to our success. All this must be done with good understanding and a “win-win” spirit.

What newly emerging leadership roles are you seeing within the sports industry at large?

Digital, once again. I am convinced of this through our project and work with eGames.

What qualities do you look for when hiring talent?

Ideas before everything! I am lucky to be surrounded by a team that aims for excellence and provides the means to achieve it. One must be inventive and versatile nowadays to understand the totality of challenges facing companies.

I appreciate curiosity. People who are curious will think “outside the box.” I appreciate collaborators who are leaders in their skills, but can work towards the interest and goals of the team and company.

What impact can executives from a different industry have on a new industry?

Hiring from outside the industry certainly brings new ideas and fresh blood. Best practices and methods of management are transferable from one sector to another.

Differences may exist between the sectors, but the primary concepts and tools of managing teams remain a common thread in any leadership role.

What contribution has executive search made to your career?

Executive search has changed my career completely, and brought together my two passions of architecture and motorsport. It was a surprise when I was approached as part of the recruitment process for the role. I quickly took to the game in order to present an innovative strategy for the Circuit. What a challenge!

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Photo courtesy of @dbcreation

This interview was conducted by IIC Partners with special thanks to Michel Grisay from Hoffman & Associates, and Circuit of Spa Francorchamps. For more features, articles, reports and thought leadership please visit www.iicpartners.com. Questions or comments can be directed to Thaddeus Andres, Head of Marketing & Communications, of IIC Partners, at tandres@iicpartners.com. For more information on Circuit of Spa Francorchamps visit www.spa-francorchamps.be.



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