



Kim Challis

**MANAGING DIRECTOR,
G4S UTILITY SERVICES,
UNITED KINGDOM**

From medicine and mechanics to senior management

Finding the right career is not always easy. But Kim Challis is the perfect example of how an individual with a willingness to learn and a determination to succeed can recover from making a wrong turn or two.

Her plan was to become a doctor. Well, that was her parents' ambition for her and she went along with it. After just a few months as a medical student at Liverpool University, however, she realised it was not for her.

Today, as managing director of G4S Utility Services, a company that provides a service to electricity, gas and water suppliers by reading meters in millions of UK homes, and which recently started installing smart meters, Kim can look back with some amusement at that false start.

In fact, the next decision she took about her career appears not to have much bearing on her present managerial role either, but Kim would beg to differ. She had taken a year out from Liverpool and, having passed A-levels in chemistry, mathematics and biology, she went to Reading University in 1993 where she achieved a First Class Honours Degree in Electronics and Mechanical Engineering.

That involved a 12-month stint as a final year project with Williams F1, one of the world's leading Formula One teams, looking at the camber on their racing cars' wheels, before she moved into production engineering with Emerson Electric. And during that period of employment, Kim explains, "I stepped away from being a pure techie and started to drive things from a project perspective – I went from hard engineering to production engineering."

The scientific approach that earned Kim a Bachelor of Engineering degree was clearly an influence as she moved on to her next job with DataTrak, a vehicle tracking business, where she was involved in GPS/GSM technology and ran its engineering department for two years.

Since it wasn't a business stream that was core to the Securicor strategy, Kim Challis found herself helping to relocate the manufacturing and engineering processes to Vienna, Austria. Kim then returned to Securicor, working for its software development company in Chippenham, Wiltshire.

Having demonstrated her project management skills, Kim was then asked in 2002 to become head of programmes at Securicor's head office in Sutton, Surrey. When the company merged with Group 4, to form G4S – the world's largest secure solutions organisation – Kim was appointed head of integration, working with the directors of both businesses in shaping the new corporate structure, before moving on to assist with the merging of both companies' operations in the UK.

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Eventually, Kim satisfied her desire to gain greater understanding of the security business, becoming G4S Secure Solutions' project director. But it didn't last long because David Taylor Smith, CEO of G4S Secure Solutions' UK and Ireland Region spotted her talent and persuaded her that a business development role would be a good career move for her.

That was a tough challenge, Kim explains, because “having been a change agent most of my life it was quite tough to have change forced upon me”. The reason, her boss explained, was that Kim's focus was too internal. Her roles were all about processes and procedures *within* the business. If she was to go further, she needed to start looking externally.

“You don't look at the markets,” he suggested. “You don't look at creating markets, or influencing them. You're not looking at sales or marketing. All of those skills need developing.

“Whilst the feedback at the time was harsh and difficult to take, it was done in a way that made me understand that it was for my own good. And he was absolutely right. It was a very valuable part of the learning process for me.”

Kim's move into a business development role – “it was a mandate, not my choice” – proved successful. “After a few months I found I really enjoyed it.” And that is where Kim Challis stayed until the role of managing director of G4S Utility Services was advertised.

She had got to know the company having helped it, in her business development role, to bid for a contract. She liked the people and her engineering background gave her an understanding of some of the challenges that would face G4S Utility Services in the coming years, as it changed from being a meter reading operation to one that also supplies, installs and maintains smart meters, which provide utility companies with readings remotely.

Kim was keen to rise to that challenge and she applied successfully for the job, taking up her first strategic management role with G4S in October 2009 and joining the board of directors of G4S Secure Solutions (UK and Ireland) under its regional president and CEO, David Taylor-Smith.

“I couldn't do the job I'm doing now if I hadn't gone through business development,” says Kim. “The interesting thing about managing G4S Utility Services is that it is a fascinating business combining both service and technical expertise into one role.

“So the introduction of the smart metering and how that market is going to develop takes me back to some of my roots. Having a background in engineering is very useful. My colleagues don't just see me as just a manager; it's an extra dimension that they respect.

“Also, I learned a lot in business development and I just wanted to put it into practice in something over which I had ownership. The opportunity just happened. It came at the right time and I decided to take it. It has involved relocating to Newcastle but my husband is very flexible and our two-year-old son Joshua is too young to care.”

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Kim Challis' career path demonstrates that a few wrong turnings along the way can still have a happy and successful outcome, and that for those with the right skills it isn't always necessary to follow a conventional route to reach the top in a company like G4S.

