Meet Inspiring EIT Community Women Leaders and Entrepreneurs

Florence Gschwend

EIT Climate-KIC PhD student & founder of Chrysalix

Tell us a bit about yourself and your connection to the EIT Community.
I did my PhD at Imperial College London as an EIT Climate-KIC label student. This meant I got to attend the EIT Climate-KIC Summer School. Starting my own company was not something I had thought of before, but over time and through the EIT and EIT Climate-KIC the idea grew.

Tell us about your company Chrysalix.
Chrysalix is about commercialising a chemical process that I worked on during my PhD. In a nutshell, the process separates the components of wood so they can be used to produce chemicals, fuels and materials with the aim of eventually replacing the entire petrochemical industry with a bioeconomy.

What has been the most rewarding moment of your career so far?
The most rewarding part has been that we made it this far. There have been loads of great moments but also some setbacks. The fact that we’re still going and things are looking good is an incredible reward.

Have you had to overcome any obstacles as a woman leader/entrepreneur?
Working in science and engineering I’ve got used to being in the minority as a woman, so I don’t think about it that often any more. When I’m at a conference and mainly surrounded by middle aged men I do feel like I’m standing out and people might not take me as seriously at the beginning. Most of the time, however, I feel people’s impressions change once you talk to them and they realise we’re doing something great.

What is the most important advice you could give to young women following in your footsteps?
My first advice would be to be bold and not worry too much. Great things happen when you come out of your comfort zone! Secondly, don’t be afraid of criticism and don’t take it personally, see it as a chance to improve. Ask for feedback whenever you can.

Who are three inspirational women in your field?
I think Naomi Klein is a very inspirational environmental activist. In her books she brings in a very personal note, which makes her much more believable than politicians. Janet Murray was our coach during the EIT Climate-KIC Greenhouse Programme. She brought together a great mix of empathy, enthusiasm, and targeted focus. She was always really open, and came across as incredibly strong yet very approachable. Other than that I’m inspired by anyone who built their own business based on their own values. E.g. Kate Hofman, from GrowUp Urban Farms, another EIT Climate-KIC start-up. She followed her dreams and is now running a successful business, improving the world around her.