

## **021 - Art of Engineering, Nicole Baird**

### **Nicole:**

Thank you. It's so nice to be here and thank you for the invite. I'm truly excited about this. I love to educate everybody on manufacturing and, and what women can do in the field. So I'm truly excited to be here.

### **Denise:**

Well, let's start by having you tell us what a senior buyer does and then, and tell us what [APTAR](#) is and does, because I was amazed when we did the first project with APTAR to learn (A) how big a company it is and (B) how many products there are.

### **Nicole:**

So for this, for me, for my role as a senior buyer, I am basically handling everything from the beginning of the purchase. So quoting contracts, finding suppliers to the end, which is making sure that our suppliers get paid. So I am working on every aspect of purchasing at my facility. So it could be raw materials, our packaging supplies, some of our own buys, services, little things right down to, you know, finding a supplier for shirts so that we have, you know, custom shirts. So I'm doing everything within the supply purchasing role currently right now. And I'm also doing some supply chain work, which we can talk about later in the podcast. So APTAR itself though makes closures that you would find in ketchup bottles, you can find it in some barbecue sauces. We also can be found in shampoo, bottles, body washes, circuit, drink bottles, Gatorade bottles. I mean, you probably have a ton of products in your home that you don't even know where the Velva is coming from. And it are coming from my facility in Midland APTAR. And I didn't know about it either until I started working here. So we're very, we have a very diverse range of products and we're very unique

### **Denise:**

And, and worldwide, that was, yeah, I think 13,000 employees are something close to that?

### **Nicole:**

Yes, yes. So we're a small division. So APTAR as a whole is very large and then Midland is pretty unique in what we make. We have another plant who also makes similar products to what we're doing. So we're pretty unique in Midland and in skin.

### **Denise:**

Very good. Well, we were delighted to be able to do the first project with APTAR and we won't disclose what we did because that's secret stuff and we get to work with you again. And that's how you and I got to

**Nicole:**

Yes, we're pretty top secret. I mean, I've had to give them my first born to be able to work here. So, But you know, we have all the confidential NDAs in place, so we can't discuss too much about what APTAR does, but it's in a pretty amazing company to work for.

**Denise:**

Yes. Well, I'm curious Nicky, because we had not, I have not interviewed anybody who's on the supply chain or purchasing side. So, you know, in our intent to really, you know, we started this podcast as an opportunity to explore how we could get more women into engineering and it rapidly expanded into helping young people explore all the opportunities that are in manufacturing, because the pandemic has made us very aware that we're not making enough people to replace the people who are retiring. So we've really expanded who we have done these podcasts with and the purchasing part of it is such a key that finding you was, was an opportunity to do that, but I'm very curious how you got started and purchasing.

**Nicole:**

So that is actually a great question. So I used to work for a company called [Lubrizol](#). I worked for a division of Lubrizol called [CPI](#), and when there a recession hit in 2008 I had just finished my well, I was almost finished with my degree and I thought, well, this is probably a good time for me to get a job. And I got hired in as a customer service rep with them and I was doing just domestic order, basic order entry. Within about six months I was working on their export and some of their higher level orders. And I was in that department for about two years and I had a very close coworker mentor. Her name was Amber and she moved into inventory purchasing and traffic as she was the supervisor over in that department.

And I had just, just told her, you know, I'm, I'd learned everything in customer service that I was ready to add some more tools to my toolbox. And she said, why might you have an opportunity for you... If you're interested to come over to purchasing. And, and at that time it was pretty tactical. It was very transactional work. And she said, I need someone to come in and kind of clean up our purchasing. Would you be in, did in that role? And, and I was cause I'm always really big, you know, one, one piece advice that I would give to any female, especially is every tool you can add to your knowledge

toolbox, take it the more, you know, the more valuable you feel and you just become so much more powerful when you have knowledge. So I took on the role and from there, it was really, for me, it was just going to be another tool in my toolbox that I ended up loving it and really growing my career from there. And anytime I had a chance to take a seminar or a training or a new role or learn something new, I just gravitated to those new experiences to add to my knowledge toolbox. So,

**Denise:**

Good for you. That being curious thing is so important.

**Nicole:**

Yes, I've learned so many that I never would've learned. And I will say for me, one of the biggest aspects of my career that I'm very thankful for is that I've always been able to work in companies that had that, you know, large company feel, but small company feel at the same time. I wore many hats in my positions. I've got to take on a lot of different opportunities that working in a giant company, you, you're more compartmentalized. And I got to build so many skills. It's been amazing and I'm still doing it now. So, I definitely feel that just by learning new things is where I really learned. And it sparked my interest in purchasing. And, and really my favorite thing to do is negotiate contracts. And so it's, to me purchasing is exactly what I'm supposed to do with my career.

**Denise:**

Good for you, that, that relationship piece of that and the negotiating part of it is to me, a, a really fun thing. I was in sales for a number of years, and I just found that to be one of the most fun things I might, I know some people are afraid of it or that's a scary part, but I, I think it's a great way to get to know people.

**Nicole:**

It is. It's very interesting. And I will say through my career, I've just learned that you think, you know, how to negotiate and, you know, even where the skills that I started out with and I thought, wow, I'm a pretty good negotiator. You know, I'm getting things done, I'm wrapping up contracts. I've learned that there's so many different ways to negotiate a contract and, and not only just negotiate contract, but negotiate relationships and expectations. So it's been a great experience for me. And I'm truly grateful, you know, to be given all of these experiences because it's very, for me, it's been a very huge learning experience in my life.

**Denise:**

So one of the things I ran across as, as I was making my notes for this was that at one time you've been a tactical buyer. I love that term, but I have no idea what it means.

**Nicole:**

Yes. So when I was a tactical buyer, I was working more with the transactional pieces of placing POs and updating pricing getting trucks in at that particular time. I was working at CPI and I was having this schedule will bulk trucks in and doing more of the transactional pieces rather than the strategic pieces. So I did that for, I wanna say four or five years between a purchasing clerk and a tactical buyer. So they kind of changed the, the title from a purchasing clerk to a tactical buyer. And then I became like a strategic buyer more as where I was going out and looking for additives. And I was looking at our facilities that were making materials. So I became more of a strategic buyer rather than a tactical one. I started to actually make more, decisions and provide information to the organization and play a key role in obtaining products and sourcing and price negotiations and all those fun pieces. But I had to know how to do the tactical, to get to the strategic

**Denise:**

Okay.

**Nicole:**

Had that. I wouldn't have known how to make the decisions.

**Denise:**

Very good. Well, okay. So that takes us to, let's talk about what you're moving into now and what exactly does a supply chain manager do?

**Nicole:**

So I am moving into the supply chain manager role and right now I am halfway in the transition and I'm working on really right now. It's the security of supply, you know, we've all seen with COVID and supply chain issues. We have not, unfortunately we have not been protected by these supply chain issues. We're seeing them just like everyone else is in the world and, and looking at our strategic plan of how do we continue to align ourselves in the market where we are a solid player where we're not affecting our customers. Just like I said, we're in every single market. So, you know, we can't make a closure. Then we are going to put customers at risk and, and we're using them in our everyday lives. So we don't wanna do that. We wanna make sure that we have the source of supply that we need, and that we're able to give our customers the best quality products.

So my focus is, you know, making sure that our demand meets what our customer demand is and, and on a, being on a level playing field so that we can all manufacture our goods and give them out to the market in a timely manner, at a good price, as we all have seen the prices of everything has gone up dramatically.

So yeah, so my job is just basically making sure that our customer demand meets our production demand, which meets our vendor demand and all of those fun things in between making sure that, you know, any new products, any equipment that we're buying is coming in on time, we're launching projects out of the supply chain group on time, you know, what we need, how do we support the organization? Just all sorts of different things that you, you wouldn't even when you think of supply chain, you think of getting things on the shelves, and there's a lot more to it than that.

**Denise:**

So give me an example of the different people or departments that you interact with in order to do that.

**Nicole:**

So for me, in our supply chain group, we have the warehouse. So anything coming in and out, anything that's shipping customer service, the planning group. But for, in my particular job, I deal with every single department, you know, I'm dealing with sales, I need the sales to be able to order what I need or to make sure that we're strategically aligned to get the material we need. I work with the engineering folks because they've got projects going on and new product launches and they need support on getting pieces of equipment or getting packaging or different conceptual ideas. I work with accounting obviously to make sure that we're paying our invoices and the vendors are set up correctly so that we don't have any issues there. So I'm really working with every piece in the business to make sure that everyone is aligned and everything is moving in a pace that gets people paid, gets us our product. So I can't, I mean, even manufacturing, you know, I'm working with them to make sure that the product is good. We don't wanna have product that's not inspect quality. I work with them. So supply chain, in my opinion, is one of those physicians where you really get to interact with every group with inside the manufacturing world.

**Denise:**

Well, and that's why I wanted to get to talk about it because it has become within the pandemic a really key role.

**Nicole:**

Absolutely. I hear the buzzword too all the time. I'm like supply chain supply chain. And I'm like, what you're talking about is so small compared to what the actual role is. I mean, I even have to deal with legal, you know, making sure contracts they're legal and NDAs are legal. I mean, there's just, there's not a single department that I don't have to interact with and I have to negotiate those relationships as well, make sure that we are getting that what we need back in a timely manner. So I mean, supply chain is huge and there's so many opportunities.

**Denise:**

Very good. So give me a typical day.

**Nicole:**

So, you know, I don't really have a typical day.

**Denise:**

Okay.

**Nicole:**

Everything is different every day, depending on what takes priority. So recently, you know, I've been dealing a lot with negotiating and securing supplies. PPE has been a big challenge for us as it is for most of the people that require PPE in their facilities. Our raw materials, same thing. And we have, have a shortage of, of labor right now throughout the manufacturing world. So shortage of labor and shortage of packaging have been an issue for us to be able to get what we need to manufacture our goods. So for me, a typical day is not a Ty there's nothing typical about my day. Everything is depending on what needs to be done that day. I would love to say a typical day is, you know, I get up in the morning and, and I do X, Y, and Z, but that's, there's no typical in my world right now. And I can't even really think of a time that there was a typical, so I never had a day where like, oh, I do this, this,

**Denise:**

So you mentioned that that APTAR is, is also experiencing the same labor shortages that is frankly worldwide. What kinds of things is APTAR doing to help mitigate that?

**Nicole:**

Yeah, so our area a big player of our area is also [Dow](#) and they're experiencing labor shortage too. You know, I'm, I'm not a hundred percent sure what our HR department is

doing to make sure that we can retain and, and get good help just because that's not a piece that I'm really involved in, but you know, that, you know, there's been discussions just in general with different vendors that I've had this discussion with and, you know, everybody's going and reevaluating one wages two benefits, but just really the work experience as a whole, what are we providing to people to make sure that they're coming work and they're feeling happy and they're feeling successful and they're getting joy out of their jobs. I, I think that's the piece where they really need to focus on, you know, people wanna go to work and they're there most of their lives, they wanna enjoy their jobs. They wanna feel value from their jobs. And so that's just something that I talk with quite a few of my vendors who basically the same question and what I'm getting from people when I talk to them is, you know, we just really wanna feel like we're valued and value is more than just a paycheck. I think appar has done a really great job at looking at, you know, what we can do to really provide a whole package experience for our employees and not just a paycheck.

**Denise:**

Good. Well, and you mentioned something earlier about APTAR being a huge company, but feeling like a small company and to me that that type of culture is so important for people to feel like they belong. And are part of, of a community.

**Nicole:**

Yes. And I actually have several friends who work in manufacturing and they work for, you know, the car industry and automotive or, you know, those types of big conglomerates in the field that they have is that they're just a number. And I don't feel like that. I mean, I have a great relationship with, with the directors and the general managers and they know about me and I know about them and I don't feel like I'm just a number. Like, I feel like we are part of a, not to sound I, but a community. Exactly. I feel like they care about me and they, you know, they understand that I'm a person with a life and a family and I'm not just a time clock and, you know, a, a timecard where I just punch in and punch out and, and that I have value. So that is a great feeling to have. And I've been very fortunate to work for companies that have felt like that.

**Denise:**

Oh, that's, that's a key. I had a conversation just in the last couple of weeks with a young woman engineer who happens to be the daughter of one of our neighbors. And she, and I'd had some conversations and she said, I just feel like I need to move on. And so she has, and one of the emails back from her was the total difference in culture between the company she left and the company she's joining, that it just feels completely different and she hadn't even started. So that, that, that culture piece is, is big. And I think we, we just need to embrace that and improve it as we go forward.

**Nicole:**

It absolutely is. And to know that, you know, after knows that the not perfect, right, they work on things like we I'm part of their diversity and inclusion launch. And I had done that at, at CPI as well. I've been part of a group called will, which is women in leadership at Lubrizol. And now at avatar is focusing on diversity and inclusion and making sure that they understand that we all bring something to the table and to have that culture where you, at the end of the day, the people who are working for you are the most important asset you can have is a really great culture to work for. And to know that they truly do care about their people just makes you feel like you're doing a job for a company that cares, and you're going to work harder. You're going to try harder. You're going to be more strategic. You're gonna think about things. You're going to think about the company because you're feeling valuable

**Denise:**

Great. You had mentioned that diversity and inclusion piece. And I did, I that's, that's what I wanted to finish with was, was what does that look like going forward as being part of that team?

**Nicole:**

So for me, diversity and inclusion has always been a huge piece for my job because I have worked in manufacturing where it predominantly been a man's world, and men have worked in that role and those roles within, inside manufacturing. And so when I had a chance to be part of will for Lubrizol, I really embraced it and, and trying to look at it more for not just women, but all people who are diverse. And, and that means so many things to, you know, it's not just one box, but for now CPI kind of launched that for me. And when APTAR said, Hey, we're gonna start this group. Is there anyone at the individual sites that want to be part of the experience of launching this? I raised my hand and I said, yes, absolutely. Because it's such an important piece to me.

And so APTAR is really just rolling out that diversity and inclusion piece of everyone has their own values. Everyone has their own set of diversity, and we all bring something different to the table based on our experiences. And just to make sure that we're embracing those with our employees and making sure that everyone knows that they have a spot at the table matter what. So we are really focusing on educating what diversity and inclusion is. Cause that's something that's fairly, not that everyone didn't know about it. Right. But we just hadn't really like brought it to the forefront. So we've been really big about educating people on that and making sure that we are being



inclusive and that we are focusing on the strengths that people bring because of their diversity.

**Denise:**

Very good. So I have, I have three quick questions.

**Nicole:**

I'm ready.

**Denise:**

Okay. What brings you joy, Nikki?

**Nicole:**

You know, my family, my, I have three kids and two of them have left the home this year. My son joined the air force. My daughter moved out and bought a house. And so we have our youngest home and just being with them and being with my sister and my parents and realizing that life is so much more than just going to work, making sure that I have joy in my job and having time with my family and spending quality time with my friends and really just making sure that everybody who's in my life is bringing me value and that I'm bringing them value. I feel, I feel very fortunate for what I have and and also I started a new health and wellness journey for myself about a year ago. And so I spent a lot of time focusing on that.

**Denise:**

Good for you. You'd like to be stuck in an elevator with?

**Nicole:**

Oh, Adam Sandler.

**Denise:**

Oh, that would be a fun trip.

**Nicole:**

Yes. But for so many reasons, because not only is he funny, but he also has that attitude. I mean, I don't know you've ever seen any pictures of him. He always is just looks like a bum and he's, but he's very well off. I mean, anyone who knows Adam Sandler knows that, and he just has this vibe about him that it's like, you know what, he's totally comfortable in his skin. And that's what I strive to do in my everyday life. And

so not only do I think it would be entertaining because he's hilarious. I also think he could have given me some really good life lessons then how to just be okay in your own skin.

**Denise:**

And do you have a morning ritual?

**Nicole:**

Well, it used to be working out. But with the volatility of the market right now, I'm usually on my computer first thing in the morning, putting out whatever fires have come out the night before, but I am going to get back into that ritual of working out every morning, because that really gets me in the right mood to deal with the day. And it gets my spirit in a healthy, positive space so that I'm not dreading issues that come my way.

**Denise**

Good for you. Well, Nick, this has been delightful as I knew it would be. And, and I need to thank my husband for introducing us because he said, you just need to call Nikki because we just had a delightful conversation.

**Nicole:**

Well, I'm so glad that he did that. And I'm so glad to be part of this experience. And I hope that anyone who is looking to get into manufacturing, especially women can understand the array of jobs and the importance that we have in these jobs and the roles, because there is so much that we can do to really move manufacturing forward. And I know it's just something that we don't think about because it's, it's not something they ever talk about in school. They don't say, Hey, there's jobs you can do. And, and it's really, especially for women that they get into the manufacturing line of work and really bring their ideas to the forefront because we need them!

**Denise**

Yes, we do. And thank you for helping me share that message.

**Nicole:**

Absolutely. I thoroughly enjoyed this and thank you for reaching out to me and offering me this opportunity it's been delightful. I really have appreciated it.

**Denise:**

Thank you, Nikki.