

Five Questions—A conversation with District 37 Club Growth Director Rhonda Walthall, DTM about her award-winning book
Flight Paths to Success: Career Insights from Women Leaders in Aerospace,
coauthored with **Brenda Mitchell**

1. What gave you the inspiration to write this book?

In May 2020 the publisher, **SAE International**, contacted me and asked if I would write a book featuring women leaders in Aerospace. Because I was super busy with work and other SAE activities, I agreed to write the book if I could have a co-author. I reached out to my long-time friend and mentor, **Brenda Mitchell**, and fortunately she agreed to be my co-author. Brenda had a great network of women in executive leadership positions, and I had a great network of women in highly technical engineering positions. Between our combined networks, we were able to enlist a wonderful cross section of women to write chapters about their career journeys.

2. How long did it take you to write it? What was your process?

The first thing Brenda and I had to do was to create a list of potential authors. We made the decision to only include women who remained in technical positions and had either engineering, math, or science degrees. That meant women who had moved into finance, quality, or human resource positions, which is common for women with technical degrees, were not candidates. We started with a list of 100 women and for a variety of reasons ended with 35.

Next, we created a list of five topics with 5-6 questions per topic, provided them to the chapter authors, and let them to decide which questions they wanted to answer. Then we had to review and edit their drafts. Finally, we had the fun task of designing the book cover. This process took six months.

On a side note, designing the book cover was a challenge because I do not consider myself to be creative. Brenda and I provided our thoughts to the SAE graphic artists about what we wanted it to look like and the artists came back a few weeks later with the exact design we requested. The problem was, Brenda and I both hated it! Now we were up against a deadline. We had three days to design a new cover! Brenda found an image of a sky with contrails that we

both liked. The contrails were going in many different directions which spoke to our theme of multiple flight paths to success. I added the rocket exhaust plume because Aerospace Engineers have the option of working on space programs. We then added a silhouette of a young girl looking up at the sky for inspiration. The SAE graphic artists came back to us with a new cover design in 24 hours and we loved it! The cover portrays the purpose of the book perfectly.

3. After reading the stories in the book, is there one key message or theme you see in the women's stories about their success?

There were several themes which emerged from each of the personal journeys. One that stood out to me was the decision to have children. Every woman who was an executive either did not have children or had a stay-at-home spouse or a nanny to raise their children. That was such a stark contrast to the decisions men must make when climbing the corporate ladder. Another theme was the willingness to relocate with the company wherever and whenever when asked, which required significant support of their spouse and children. Women who decided not to relocate because of their families did not regret their decision. However, they did experience "delays" in their career progression.

4. What would you hope for a girl or woman who aspires to a career in Aerospace to learn from this book?

This book provides valuable insights for young women in high school or college as well as early career engineers. Even mid-career engineers can find inspiration in this book. The goal of the book was to show how there are many different flight paths to career success. Each woman must chart her own course and make decisions along the way which provide her with the best work-life balance. Career success is achieved at multiple levels. You do not need to be an executive to be successful.

5. Do you think Toastmasters helped you with this project?

My Toastmasters' skills really came in handy after the book was published in March 2021. SAE arranged for multiple podcasts, panel sessions, and interviews to publicize the book. My head was spinning! Writing the book was easy. Publicizing the book was stressful. I relied on my communication skills learned through Toastmasters to get me through those events. After about four months the publicity settled down. Things were quiet until I learned

through SAE that the book had won an award from the Independent Press (Distinguished Favorite) this year. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think of myself as an award-winning author! Astronaut yes! Award-winning author no! Because of this award, there has been a lot of attention on the book again. I may be back on a "virtual book tour" soon.