

BMW NA 50th Anniversary | 50 Stories for 50 Years

Chapter 47: "BMW NA Associates: The People Make the Difference."

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If you ask former CEO Bernhard Kuhnt what BMW of North America's associates contribute to the company's success, his answer is simple: "Everything!"

"BMW North America's associates are, number one, hugely diverse in the truest sense, and very professional, very motivated," said Kuhnt, who served as CEO from 2017 to 2021. "I had a hugely enjoyable time there because the individual areas of the organization were all driven, and they all wanted to succeed."

That's been true since 1975, when BMW of North America replaced independent importer Max Hoffman as the distributor of BMW automobiles in the US. From the beginning, BMW NA attracted capable and energetic associates, and we've met quite a few past and present over the course of the previous 46 stories. As BMW NA's 50th anniversary year winds to a close, it's time to focus on five associates who serve the company today. Some have worked at BMW NA for decades while others for only a few years. Regardless of tenure, all have contributed to BMW NA's success...and all are part of its history.

As current CEO Sebastian Mackensen explains, "History is memories and the story of people. It's where you come from and where certain values are grounded and developed over time in a company, especially through the people who carry them forward. If you want to step into the BMW family, you need to see where your colleagues come from, who shaped them, and how they are today. Everybody has a history, and you are a product of yours. I think that's why it's relevant to cherish it, to be mindful of it, and to be informed about and recognize the people and experiences that brought us here."

Tom DiGregorio, Senior Product Engineer, Chassis Systems (US Aftersales)



Tom DiGregorio had already held part-time jobs in auto parts stores and at a limousine company when he began studying automotive and diesel technology at Lincoln Technical Institute in Union, New Jersey. "BMW came to our school looking to hire people for the Jersey City

Vehicle Preparation Center, which they now call the Vehicle Distribution Center," DiGregorio said. "I didn't know anything about BMW, but it looked like a great opportunity to start a career."

Indeed it was, especially for a smart young technician. Joining BMW NA in 1988, DiGregorio began by readying cars for delivery and installing CD players and telephones in E32 7 Series sedans at the Vehicle Preparation Center. From there, he moved to Montvale, New Jersey and a job in BMW NA's national workshop. Before long, he'd become Shop Foreman, and in 1997 he was named Press Vehicle Technical Coordinator. "We prepared new vehicles for the press launches, did all the repair work on those vehicles, and did support at the launches, making sure all the cars made it to their destinations defect-free," DiGregorio said. "At the end of the day, we'd go through the cars again, make sure anything that was broken was repaired, and set them all up for the next day."

In the mid 1990s, BMW of North America was contracted by McLaren to service the

BMW M70/2 V12 powered McLaren F1 supercars in North America. DiGregorio became one of only a handful of technicians qualified to work on the McLaren F1. "I got to go to England for two weeks of training, and then came back and did all of the services for the McLarens in the US." Earlier this year, he assisted in replacing the \$25,000 windshield in the McLaren F1 GTR owned by BMW NA. "It's my favorite car to work on, but you'd better take care and be aware of your surroundings when you work on it!"

Following a stint in BMW's Quality Information Center, which looks for quality issues and reports its findings directly to Munich, DiGregorio spent several years as a National Technical Service Engineer, helping dealers solve problems that had stymied their own technicians and introducing remote vehicle programming.

In 2011, DiGregorio took up his current position as Senior Product Engineer within the Aftersales division. "We write the service bulletins and the bulletins for recalls and campaigns," he said, "and we do the Service Round Table, making videos for product improvements or helping technicians handle problems in



the field." DiGregorio specializes in chassis systems, which includes suspension, steering, and brakes. All of those components, he said, "have gone from purely mechanical to computerized—even the sway bars are electronically controlled. I've seen a lot of innovations since I started."

The cars have become more digital, but diagnosis and repair remains the most satisfying part of DiGregorio's job. "I love going down to the workshop and getting hands-on with the other technicians, communicating with them, and working with them to get the resolution."

DiGregorio has advanced steadily throughout his nearly 40 years with BMW NA, aided by strong mentorship as well as BMW NA's practice of moving talented and ambitious associates up the ladder. "Bob Wildonger, who recently passed away, was one of the managers while I was at the VPC, and he just took you under his wing and made sure you understood what you were doing," DiGregorio said. "Vlodek Olczak was always engaged, and he had your back for everything—just one of the all-time great guys to work for. So was Bob Breznak, a technician who started with me, later became Area Market Manager, and then came back to the technical field. The people here have been great, and no matter where you go in any department, you always have a good working relationship and great communication.

"I worked at a domestic brand dealership for about two weeks before BMW hired me, and if I were still there I'd probably still be turning wrenches on customer vehicles. At BMW, I've had the opportunity to go in any number of directions, but I chose to stay in technical service because I enjoy the hands-on part of it. There's always something new, and it's always a challenge to work through a problem and bring resolution to the situation."

Eileen Paletta, Team Manager, Customer Communications and Quality Assurance



While Tom DiGregorio handles problems from the technical side, Eileen Paletta takes care of the human dimension. As Team Manager for Customer Communications & Quality Assurance, she interacts with BMW owners who run into difficulties with their cars—or who want to thank BMW for making especially robust vehicles.

"When customers have serious accidents in their vehicles, whether it's a BMW, a MINI, or even a motorcycle, some write to thank us for saving their lives," Paletta said. "I'm honored to interact with customers who've had the most severe accidents—sometimes there's nothing left of the vehicle. I've seen photos of vehicles that have been shot at, gone off cliffs or down ravines, taken up in tornadoes, stampeded by wild horses, hit by trains... It's pretty incredible. I share them with our

executives, my team, and the plant where the vehicle was built so the production associates can feel proud and motivated."

Paletta has been working in Customer Relations since 2008, but she was hired by BMW of North America in January 1997. "I started as a secretary, which morphed very soon after into Events Specialist handling dealer meetings," she said. "Before that, I led the editorial process at a company that specialized in logistics and transportation for Fortune 500 companies."

Upon joining BMW NA, Paletta became part of a new Retail and Industry Relations department led by the company's first head of Corporate Communications, Tom

McGurn. The department handled auto shows as well as dealer relations, including the BMW Dealer Forum and MINI Dealer Council. "We had a direct line to the CEO's office, and it was exciting to be part of several major areas within the company. I got immersed in everything, and I found everything fascinating."

Paletta spent ten years working under McGurn, whom she cites as an important mentor along with Joan Malone, who led Retail Recognition. "Tom taught me so much about relationships and making connections with our dealers," she said, "and I take a lot from Joan in the way she held her cool and orchestrated her day."

When BMW NA underwent a restructuring following the financial crisis of 2008, Paletta became curious about an opening in Customer Relations. "I got the job, and that turned into the next chapter of my life," she said. "I've been in this department for many years now, and I've had various roles within it."

Along with handling the testimonials mentioned above, Paletta also connects with customers whose BMWs have passed important milestones on the odometer, including one that reached 460,000 miles. "We also get letters from students, so I like to promote our STEP program or the teen driving school at the Performance Center."

Not all of her encounters with customers are positive, since some customers contact BMW NA executives to complain about problems with their vehicles. "Back in the day, it was very polite, and they'd write a nice letter, but everything has changed now," Paletta said.

Change is part of any working environment, however, especially one built on technological progress like BMW. "Now, customer service representatives have to be savvy on so many different topics, and we have to rely on content libraries because there are so many more components," Paletta said. "We did a lot more letter writing back in the day, but customers don't want lengthy correspondence. They want the information right away, in quick little chats, but it has to be just as meaningful. Speaking and writing in the right tone of voice and keeping cool even when things become a little volatile is key."

Despite those challenges, Paletta still enjoys her work in Customer Relations, and interacting with new associates. "I tell new hires that we're excited to have them, because they're bringing us a fresh perspective," she said. "I don't like hearing, 'We've always done it that way,' which frustrates me. Let's do it differently, and let's be creative. I think that's what we're about."

Above all, she loves BMW's products. "I'll take different routes to work just to feel the curves," Paletta said, "and I was one of the first people on the track at the Performance Center when it opened in 1999. Once you do timed laps in an M3, you become a little addicted! And on my first drive home in my 430i Convertible, an eagle soared directly above me. The next morning, I started leaving for work an hour early just so I could drive along the Hudson River and over the mountains, and after work I'd drive and drive and drive. I just love our cars!"

Carolyn Capozzalo, Senior Engineer, Vehicle Regulatory Standards

While associates like Paletta have spent long stints in much-loved roles, associates like Carolyn Capozzalo have followed their curiosity wherever it leads. "I like a challenge," she said. "I love anything where I can learn."

Over two decades at BMW of North America, that desire to keep moving forward has seen Capozzalo advance from Receptionist to Senior Engineer, and to innovate back-end solutions that help BMW's cars adapt to their customers' needs.

She began her BMW career in 2002 as an employee of BMW NAs office services supplier. "I was hired to be a receptionist in Montvale, which was very quiet, but then I was asked to move to Woodcliff Lake, where I could do desktop publishing for parts bulletins and other documents that went out to dealers," she said. "I was like, 'Yes, please! Give me some things where I can learn and do more.'"

Three years later, Capozzalo was hired by staffing company to work in BMW NA's Purchasing Department, and in 2007 she became an official BMW employee as an Administrative Assistant in the IT department. "They had gotten a new purchasing

system that everyone hated, but I said, 'Hey, I'll figure it out!'"

Shortly after she'd mastered the purchasing system software, Capozzalo was approached to join BMW NA's Customer Relations department. "I said, 'Sure, why not?' You learn a lot when people complain, and if customers are upset about something you get to see more of the product and how the business handles it."

Not long after she'd taken that position, BMW downsized its staffing in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Capozzalo's position was eliminated, so she returned to Canon before rejoining the auto industry as a service advisor, first at a non BMW Group brand dealership and then with two MINI dealerships near Woodcliff Lake. "As much as I loved my customers and helping people take care of their cars, the hours are insane," she said. "I'd kept in contact with friends from BMW, and in 2016 Don Law invited me to come back to work on the Parts Technical Hotline. I'm 99.99 percent sure I was the first female parts hotline person ever hired, and I basically got to learn about all the components and how to read engineering and wiring diagrams and things like that."

The Parts Technical Hotline offices were located next to the Warranty Department at Woodcliff Lake, and it wasn't long before George Joseph enlisted Capozzalo to join Warranty. "He was great, and when I was in Warranty I was working with Engineering," she said. "When my counterpart in the engine emissions department went back to Germany, she suggested I apply for her position. I did, and I got a job reporting to CARB and EPA for warranty extensions for emissions-relevant parts."

That wasn't the end of Capozzalo's journey within BMW NA. "In 2020, Kiri Moises said, 'Hey, there's a position opening up in the Connected Driving Department. What do you think about joining that?' The team lead happened to be my customer at the MINI dealership, and so was the person I was replacing." Capozzalo worked on analytics within Connected Drive, until team lead Ferenc Tarnok suggested she learn more about back-end systems. "Ultimately, I was the person responsible for Functions on Demand—like remote engine start, which you can buy even if the car wasn't ordered with it—for all services provisioned for BMW vehicles in the US."

Still more serendipitously, Capozzalo happened to be outside the Engineering building when she ran into Sam Campbell, Head of the Vehicle Safety Engineering and Intelligent Transportation Systems. "A position on his team was open, and I thought he would be a great mentor to work for. I didn't know what half of the job description said, but he said he thought I'd be great at it, and so I gave it a try."

In January 2024, Capozzalo took up her current position as Senior Engineer, Vehicle Regulatory Standards. "Basically, my job is to monitor non-safety and non-emissions regulations and ensure BMW is complying with them," she said. "When I first took the position, you just had to watch the federal register, but the current administration has decided to be more hands-off with regulations and laws. You either have one federal regulation that is applied to 50 states, or you have 50 states making regulations. My biggest topic is chemicals, which is everything from the fluids that go into our cars to PFAS, the 'forever chemicals,' which are added to products that are water- or heat-resistant, like gaskets and hoses, convertible tops, carpeting, and upholstery."

That's a far cry from answering phones and filing invoices, but it's not atypical for BMW NA associates who display talent and drive. "I've been fortunate to work with people who would allow me to learn if I showed interest in something," Capozzalo said. "So many of my managers have been very supportive, very nurturing, and very caring. That's the greatest thing for me in a manager, to say, 'Hey would you be interested in learning a different aspect of this?' Any chance I can, I'll look to learn."

Erin Walter, Team Manager, Lease Loyalty, Used Vehicle Business, BMW Financial Services



When we think of BMW of North America, we usually think of the headquarters in Woodcliff Lake, but an equally important branch of the business can be found in Columbus, Ohio, home of BMW Financial Services. BMW Financial Services is vital to the company's success, not least because it's the division with which nearly all of BMW's customers interact on a personal basis. When customers call in to discuss their loans or leases, they might end up speaking with Erin Walter, Lease Loyalty Team Manager for the South/Central Region.

Walter started her career as a Customer Service Advocate in January 2015. "I actually started as a temporary associate in our inbound customer service call center," Walter says. "I got my degree in English literature with a specialty in Native American poetry, and I think it helped make me better with written communications and reading comprehension."

Walter was already a BMW fan when she joined Financial Services, and drawn to the company on the strength of the brand. "Some startups might not be there in five or ten years, but I knew BMW would be," she said, "and shortly after I got hired by BMW directly in August 2015, we had an i3 test drive. It was just so cool to be able to experience the vehicles."

After two years in customer service, Walter became a Refinance Specialist. "We would field calls and help people restructure their lease or loan accounts," she said. "In 2018, when we made a decision to outsource our refinance process, I stayed on the team to help them get off the ground as far as funding their deals and submitting credit applications through our system. I had to learn a lot about system integration and our internal processes surrounding funding and credit."

That experience propelled Walter into a new post as Team Leader in Customer Service. "I started in February 2020, just in time for COVID to hit," she said. "I had to learn that role from home, which was super-challenging as a first-time supervisor, and my first couple of weeks were spent ordering the call center laptops and getting everyone set up to work from home. It was definitely a trial by fire!"

In 2023, she moved to her current position as Lease Loyalty Team Manager. "I really love this position, and getting to branch out and work more with our dealers and sales and marketing managers. My primary role is call center management, monitoring my associates and helping with any questions they might have," Walter said. "I'm also engaged with project work on EV readiness, since we'll have about a 95% increase in EVs coming off lease next year. I'm researching a possible discount for EVs coming off-lease, and a lot of my time is spent working with Legal and Compliance, as well as with the marketing group. It's all very collaborative, and my current boss Megan Sullivan is really great at guiding these kinds of projects. She's on a different level than anybody I've ever met."

In addition to Sullivan, Walter said she's gotten effective mentorship from Alicia Reinhart in the refinance department. "She gave me the tools and empowered me to take the path to leadership." Walter also cites Lisa McKinnon for "helping me



understand how to look at numbers and measure things across a call center, while showing that you can be empathetic and understanding and also expect high-performing results from your team."

Walter notes that all of her managers have been women. "I just love that



there's such a strong female leadership team, which has helped me become a better leader."

After ten years with BMW Financial Services, Walter remains enthusiastic about the work, and eager to continue learning new skills and technologies. "I really appreciate BMW's commitment to bettering the company technologically, to remain a competitive service provider in our space," she said.

As for her own future with BMW Financial Services, Walter said she's in for the long haul. "I'm so proud to work here, and I just love it," she said. "I've drunk the Kool-Aid, and I couldn't imagine working anywhere else."

Ali Abubakar, Market Research Analyst, Product Management

Ali Abubakar has only been with BMW of North America for three years, but he's already rising through the ranks as a business analyst. "I started as an intern in my senior year at Rutgers, where I did a BS in business and finance," he said. "I was working in the Warranty Department and doing a whole bunch of projects on warranty reporting."

Before taking the internship with BMW NA, Abubakar held part-time jobs at Autozone and a Toyota dealership, and he interned with a private equity firm in Manhattan during the summer before his senior year. "I think everyone needs a job they don't like to make them appreciate a job they do like," he said. "I can't say I like private equity as much as I like BMW. I had four BMWs while I was in college, and I have a huge love for the brand."

After graduating in May 2023, Abubakar joined BMW NA as a Business Analyst. "I was responsible for a lot of the sales reporting within the Eastern Region," he said. "I was the data nerd, and my day consisted of living within Excel. I would send out daily sales reports to see how the region is doing, how we're maintaining the daily pace. Another big part was market share, seeing how we're doing versus our core four competitors."

Being so fresh out of school allowed Abubakar to apply new technologies to the task. "No one used ChatGPT here before me, and I use ChatGPT for everything," he said. "There were a lot of things in Excel that I didn't know how to do when I started—I may have exaggerated my way into this role!—but I didn't let that stop me from performing all the duties. I would ask ChatGPT how to use the formulas in Excel, and to do a lot of other things within Excel that I didn't even know existed until I needed them."

Even though his older colleagues had the initial edge when it came to Excel, Abubakar said they welcomed his use of ChatGPT "especially when they saw that response times and turnaround were significantly down compared to what they used to be, though a big part of that was because we moved from Cognos [software] to Tableau. I am a lot more familiar with Tableau, and every time I have an improvement or suggestion I would reach out to the Tableau developers or to the people in National Sales Department who are responsible for these dashboards to make improvements."

As that suggests, Abubakar focuses on the IT side of BMW's business, which served him well at BMW NA's most recent dealer meetings. "Being the analyst at those meetings is difficult, frankly, because you have every C-suite executive, including the CEO, asking if you can pull up their deck, make changes, go through it with them again, or provide information," he said. "The meeting lasts four days, and for the first three days we're finalizing the presentation and putting everything together. Quite frankly, I'm really glad I got through it, especially last year when I was the only analyst to go to the meeting and had to put the deck together by myself."

In October, Abubakar's ability to handle that pressure helped him earn a promotion to a new post as Market Research Analyst, Product Management. "Essentially, I'll be responsible for conducting market studies, and I'll have access to a customer database where I can send out surveys on any topic," he said. "For example, I could ask what people think of the cupholders in a BMW, or the sunroof that doesn't open in the X3. And when I get the results back, I perform the analysis."

This time, he'll be analyzing that data not through Excel but with Python and Sequel, adding to his repertoire of software expertise. "I'm pretty excited for that, since I've

only used Python and Sequel in school, not in a work setting," he said, "and the information will help determine what actually ends up in our cars based on customer preference."

While working at BMW NA, Abubakar is simultaneously pursuing a Master of Science in Business Analytics at Cornell, which will come in handy as he works his way up the ladder. "I always hear about people who've worked here for 30, 40, or 50 years—longer than I've been alive, quite frankly—and it's clearly a good place to stay if this many people have been around for that long," he said. "I'm really excited for my new job, and I would love to stay with BMW for the rest of my career if possible."

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