

Leadership, collaboration and the changing face of the sealing industry

The sealing industry is evolving, driven by changing technologies, growing sustainability demands, and greater collaboration. In this interview, three leaders from the European Sealing Association discuss innovation, industry challenges, and the changing face of technical leadership.

By Frank Weber



From left: Anna Berger, Francesca Torriani and Julia Köder during this year's ESA Annual General Meeting in Seville. A changing face of leadership in the sealing industry – stepping forward, contributing and shaping what comes next.

For years, female leadership within the European Sealing Association (ESA) was the exception rather than the rule. Today, the ESA's largest division is led by Chairwoman Anna Berger and Vice Chairwoman Julia Köder – following the successful tenure of Francesca Torriani. Their transition marks more than a leadership change. It reflects a broader shift within an industry that is slowly becoming more diverse, more collaborative, and more visible.

A decade ago, such a leadership constellation would have been notably rare within the ESA and the industry at large. Today, few would question it. In this interview the three women share their perspectives on technology, responsibility, collaboration and what it means to lead in a field where the most critical components are often the ones nobody notices.

Different paths, one industry

Few people plan a career in sealing technology. For Anna Berger, Julia Köder and Francesca Torriani, the industry was not the original destination, yet each discovered something that made them stay. Berger arrived almost by chance: a job posting, an interview, and a conversation with a development manager who conveyed the technical depth of the field in under an hour.

"Sealing solutions are used in virtually every industry," she recalls. "Every application brings different challenges, and there is always something new to learn."

Köder came through mechanical engineering, drawn by what she describes as the detective work of the discipline.

"What fascinated me was the combination of engineering, practical application and real-world impact," she says, and also the discovery that a component often perceived as a small accessory part carries far more technical complexity than most people assume. Torriani points to purpose. After a master's degree in Energy and Nuclear Engineering and a first role in

sales support, she joined General Packing and never left the sealing world.

"Once I understood how important sealing technology is for industrial safety and environmental protection," she says. "I never looked back."

Despite their different paths, all three describe a similar realization: sealing technology is far more complex – and far more important – than its modest appearance suggests.

The technology nobody notices

That invisibility remains one of the industry's defining and recurring challenges.

Sealing components are routinely classified as C-parts: standard commodities, sourced on price, overlooked in design reviews. Yet the consequences of getting them wrong can be significant. The perception that sealing technology is simple is often frustrating to the three engineers.

"The true importance of a sealing solution," says Berger, "often becomes visible only when it fails and an entire plant is affected."

Köder approaches the issue from a systems perspective, which is where her thinking consistently leads. A sealing solution, she argues, is never merely a product selection. It is a technical assessment of an entire system, taking into account flange geometry, surface conditions, bolt loads, installation practice, operating media, temperature, pressure and emissions requirements.

Torriani broadens the perspective further. Sealing technology, she notes, is fundamental to the safety, reliability and environmental performance of industrial facilities worldwide, yet receives remarkably little attention outside the specialist community. The gap between actual importance and perceived importance, she argues, remains one of the industry's biggest challenges.

An industry facing new pressures

The expectations placed on sealing technology are rising. Regulatory developments, sustainability targets, emissions requirements and new applications — hydrogen infrastructure foremost among them — are reshaping the landscape faster than at any point in recent memory.

For Köder, the direction is clear: engineers must think in solutions rather than products.

“Customers expect solutions that are safe, reliable and sustainable at the same time. That requires a much deeper understanding of the entire application.”

Berger points to the knowledge demands that follow. As technical requirements increase, so does the need for people who understand not only materials and dimensions but also application contexts, operating conditions and industry-specific challenges. The future, she believes, will depend as much on expertise as on innovation.

Torriani raises a challenge that no single company can solve alone: the PFAS debate. Potential regulatory restrictions on per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances carry significant implications for sealing materials across the industry.

“Topics such as PFAS regulations or sustainability requirements affect the entire industry,” she says. “Collaboration will become increasingly important.” That conviction naturally leads to a broader question: how does an industry prepare for change?

More than a leadership transition

The answer, all three suggest in different ways, begins with participation.

When asked what she is most proud of as she passes the chairmanship on, Torriani does not mention a technical initiative, a standard or a regulatory milestone. Instead, she points to people.

“When I first became active within the ESA, seeing women in leadership positions was extremely uncommon.”

That observation resonates beyond the association itself. Technical leadership positions across much of European industry remain predominantly male, and the sealing sector is no exception. Yet change often becomes visible through moments like this one. Today, the ESA's Flange Gasket Division — the association's largest — is led by Berger as Chairwoman and Köder as Vice Chairwoman.

For Torriani, that is meaningful. “Not because they are women, but because it reflects how our industry is evolving.”

Berger and Köder are careful to frame their new roles less as symbols and more as responsibilities. Both speak of continuity: building on existing work, strengthening

technical exchange, encouraging broader participation.

“We are building on the work of many people who contributed before us,” says Berger. Köder shares that view: “Strong associations depend on active participation. Our responsibility is to continue strengthening technical exchange and encouraging others to contribute.”

Technical leadership positions are often still predominantly male, and the sealing and process industries are no exception. All three describe similar experiences: a need to establish credibility that male colleagues rarely face in the same way, especially in customer meetings and standards discussions.

“Technical confidence, good preparation and clear communication can change a great deal,” says Köder. “But I would like to see women in technical roles perceived as a normal part of the industry, not as an exception.”

Torriani sees structural measures as the most effective lever: equal pay, support for young families, flexible working arrangements. The cultural dimension runs deeper and cannot be solved by industry alone, but the industry can choose how it shows up.

Why industry collaboration matters

Although they represent competing companies, all three find genuine value in working together through the ESA — a stance that may seem counterintuitive until one considers the nature of the challenges involved.

Berger values the perspective it offers: understanding issues that extend beyond any single company's horizon and building relationships that remain valuable long after meetings conclude. She arrived at her first ESA gathering expecting the European Space Agency, and, after recovering from that particular disappointment, quickly came to appreciate the network for what it actually offers. Köder makes the logic explicit.

“Many technical and regulatory issues affect the entire industry. Bringing together different viewpoints — irrespective of company or gender — helps everyone make better decisions.”

Good solutions, she argues, emerge where experience, standards knowledge, application practice and different perspectives converge. Torriani's relationship with the ESA developed gradually. She attended her first meeting knowing nobody except her manager, spent her early sessions listening rather than speaking, and slowly found her footing: first through small contributions, then working groups, then Vice Chairwoman, and ultimately three years as Chairwoman of the Flange Gasket Division.

“The experience gave me insights I could not easily have developed in my day-to-day work. And despite the assumption that competitors cannot benefit from participating, there are

many shared goals on which we can work together.”

In an industry facing increasingly complex technical and regulatory challenges, that ability to collaborate may become one of its most valuable assets.

Looking ahead

Asked what advice they would give to the next generation of professionals, the three answers converge around a theme that also happens to describe their own journeys: stay curious, keep learning, and do not be intimidated.

“The sealing industry offers far more variety and opportunity than most people realise,” says Berger. Köder adds: “Technical expertise grows through hands-on experience, collaboration and the willingness to ask questions, not just through formal knowledge.”

Torriani closes with a conviction that has guided her own career: complexity, properly understood, is not a barrier but an invitation. “Do not be afraid of complexity. Some of the most important innovations begin exactly where others see only difficulties.” She returns, as she often does, to Leonardo da Vinci: details make perfection, and perfection is not a detail. Their paths into the industry were different.

The direction they point toward is the same: an industry strengthened by expertise, collaboration and people willing to step forward, contribute, and lead. The passing of the torch is simply the moment when that commitment becomes visible. ■

About the author

Frank Weber has spent his career as a senior executive in the international sealing industry, most recently leading the EMEA and APAC regions of the TEADIT Group. He currently serves as Vice Chair of the European Sealing Association.

Anna Berger

Dr. rer. nat. in Organic Chemistry, University of Regensburg. Joined Frenzelit in 2020, where she works across Research & Development and Application Engineering. *Chairwoman, ESA Flange Gasket Division.*

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