



WOMEN IN CUSTOMS

Interview with Constanze Voß, German Customs: A journey of courage, adaptability and leadership



As part of the WCO Women in Customs series, we are pleased to introduce Constanze Voß, a senior official of the German Customs Administration who has navigated her way through numerous roles and challenges throughout her career. From her early days as a lawyer seeking new paths to managing the financial control of undeclared work in Germany, Constanze's journey showcases the importance of resilience, adaptability and leadership.

In this interview, she reflects on her career, sharing the lessons she's learned along the way and offering advice to young women aspiring to make their mark in Customs and beyond.

WCO: Constanze, thank you for joining us today. Can you start by telling us a bit about where you come from and how you ended up working in Customs?

Constanze Voß: Thank you. I grew up and spent my teenage years near Stuttgart, a beautiful city in the southwest of the country. Later on, studying law took me to various other cities in Germany. After qualifying as a lawyer, I found it difficult to secure a traditional legal job, such as a judge or public prosecutor. During that time in Germany, there was an oversupply of new lawyers, which meant that I had to think creatively about my career.

I came across a job advertisement for German Customs, and while it wasn't part of my original plan, I was interested in finding out more. The Customs field seemed like a

unique intersection of law, trade and international relations. Looking back, it was purely by coincidence and chance that I ended up applying, but sometimes it's the unexpected paths that lead to the most fulfilling careers.

WCO: What was your first role in German Customs, and how did you adapt to the new environment?

Constanze Voß: My first role was as Head of the Border Division at the Swiss-German border. I was responsible for the frontier guards along a 340-kilometre stretch, managing a large operational field with an international and, to some extent, political dimension. For someone coming from a legal background, this was a huge adjustment. I had to quickly get up to speed on Customs procedures, border control and security management.

In addition, it was also suggested that one of the biggest challenges for me would be the male-dominated world of Customs at that time. As a woman entering into this environment, I was often told that I had to assert myself in an area where there were few female leaders. But, after a while, I realized that – regardless of gender – the skills that would be essential for success were competence and communication. I realized that I earned the trust and respect of my colleagues by being at once knowledgeable, approachable and empathetic.

WCO: You mentioned that, early on in your Customs career, you were often told that it was a very male-dominated world. How did you navigate that, and what changes have you seen over time?

Constanze Voß: Yes, when I entered the Customs world, it was, in fact, mostly dominated by men, especially in leadership roles. In the early days, I was therefore sometimes made to feel that I had to work harder to prove myself, not just as a newcomer, but as a woman in a predominantly male environment.

However, I have to say that, although my start in the Customs administration was a challenge in many different respects, I was always supported, pushed and encouraged. I never felt that, in my role as a manager, being female was a disadvantage. The challenge was more about self-confidence – realizing that I had to push myself to take up space, speak up and prove that my contributions were just as valuable as anyone else's. Over time, I realized that I brought certain strengths to my role, particularly with regard to communication and leadership.

One area of communication and leadership where I found I could make a real difference was emotional intelligence. In my experience, it is sometimes easier for women to develop a different sensitivity in interpersonal dynamics, which can be crucial in leadership. Whether it's addressing conflicts or motivating teams, being able to connect with people on a deeper level helped me build strong, trusting relationships with my colleagues. This was especially important in a field where you need your team to be fully aligned with the mission.

WCO: How has German Customs evolved to become more diverse, and how does it support the career development of women?

Constanze Voß: German Customs has made significant progress in promoting diversity, and now we are seeing more women in leadership positions. I think the Administration realized that gender equality is more than just numbers; it's about benefiting from a variety of content, perspectives and skills. Today, the organization actively seeks to recruit women and highlights the opportunities available to them within Customs.

One of the ways in which the German Customs Administration particularly supports women – and men as well, of course – is by offering flexibility. While there's a rotation policy that allows you to advance in your career, you can also choose to keep your current job and stay where you are living if your family situation requires it.

The German Customs Administration is also committed to fostering a work-life balance, which has been invaluable to me, especially as a mother. It's a very supportive environment for all their employees who want to have both a career and a family.

WCO: You've had a diverse career, from border management to human resources – and now financial control of undeclared work. What do you think are the key factors to succeeding in such varied roles?

Constanze Voß: The key is adaptability. Every role I've taken on has been completely different from the last, and each one came with its own set of challenges. For example, after my time at the Swiss border, I moved to the procurement unit and later the internal audit unit, working in completely different fields from border management. But this diversity is what has kept my career interesting and fulfilling.

Each new role required me to step outside of my comfort zone, but that's where growth happens. You can't always know everything before you start a new position, but you have to be willing to learn, ask questions and trust your ability to adapt. Customs is a large organization with many different branches, especially in Germany where Customs is also responsible for some tasks not related to the original Customs areas, such as my current work as Head of the Directorate for the Financial Control of Undeclared Work. So, there are always opportunities to challenge yourself and grow.

WCO: What advice would you give to young women entering Customs or any other field?

Constanze Voß: My advice would be to be courageous and confident in your abilities. Don't be afraid to try new things or take on roles that may seem intimidating at first. Customs offers a wide range of opportunities, and sometimes the most rewarding roles are the ones you didn't initially see yourself in.

Most importantly, stay true to yourself. It's easy to feel pressured to fit a certain mould, but authenticity is what will set you apart. Also, don't underestimate the value of continuous learning – both professionally and personally. Seek out opportunities to

grow, challenge yourself and never stop developing your skills. Women today have more opportunities than ever in Customs, and it's up to us to take advantage of them.

WCO: What is your approach to leadership? Can you elaborate on why it is so important?

Constanze Voß: My approach to leadership involves a sense of pleasure, as I think it's essential to bring a positive energy and a sense of enjoyment to your work, especially in leadership. It's not just about getting the job done – it's about creating an environment where people feel motivated and engaged. If you, as a leader, can bring enthusiasm and a sense of contentment to what you do, that energy is contagious.

I've found that, even in the most challenging roles, there's always room for positivity. In fact, some of my most difficult jobs turned out to be the most rewarding because I was able to maintain a balance between hard work and enjoyment. It helps to keep things in perspective, and it encourages those around you to stay motivated, too. Pleasure and contentment don't mean taking the job lightly – it means creating a space where people enjoy the work they do and feel a sense of pride in their achievements.

WCO: Finally, what do you find most rewarding about working in Customs?

Constanze Voß: For me, the most rewarding part of working in Customs is the sense of purpose it brings. Customs in Germany is about more than just trade and border security – of course, it's about protecting the public and ensuring the smooth flow of goods, which impacts our everyday life. But, also due to the broad portfolio of non-Customs-specific activities, it's so much more than that: a large organization with a unique sense of unity and shared goals, open communication, respectful interaction as well as both social and human values.

German Customs is also a very socially conscious administration. There's a strong emphasis on the work-life balance and personal development which has allowed me to balance my career with raising a family. It's rare to find an organization that offers both professional challenges and such a strong support system, and that's what makes it so fulfilling to be part of the German Customs family.