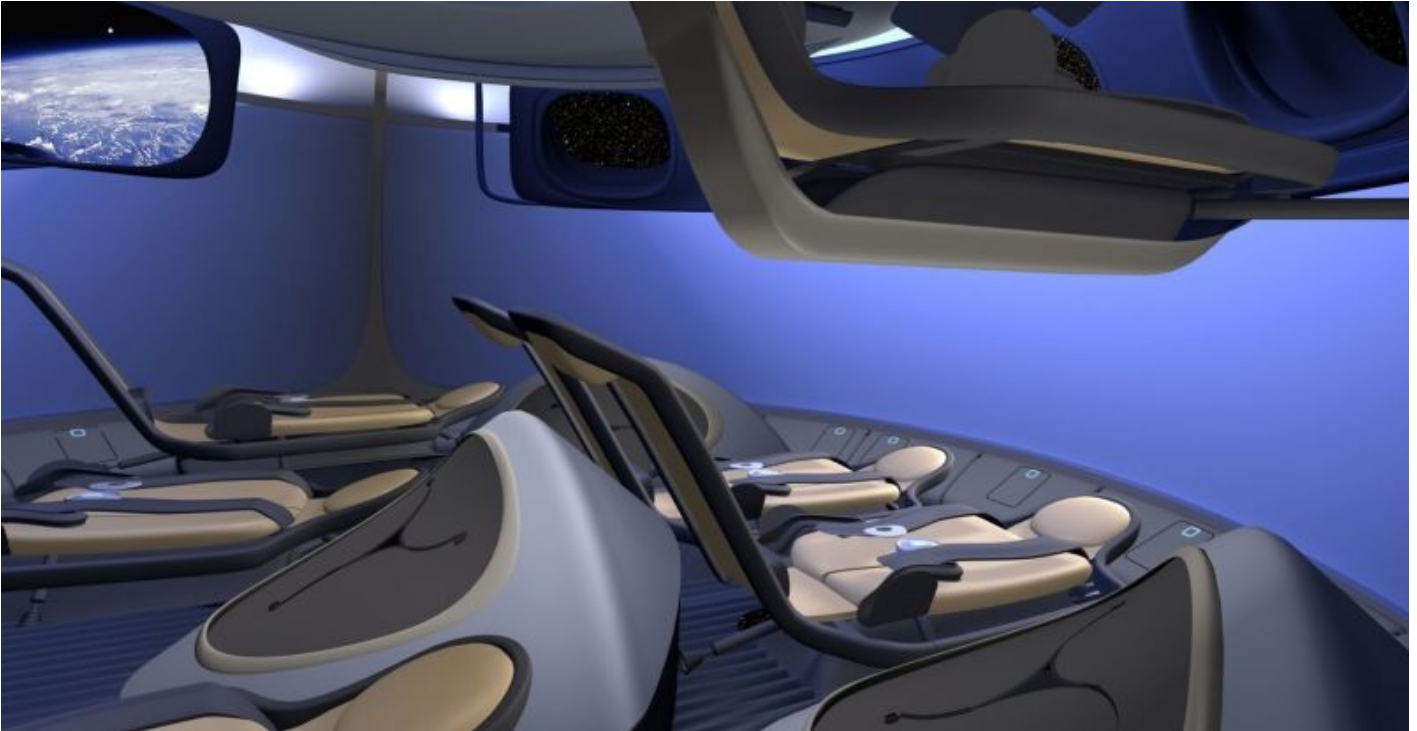




BOEING'S RACHELLE ORNAN-STONE: FROM SPACE CAMP TO STARLINER

News / Manufacturer, Personalities



Dr Rachelle Ornan-Stone wanted to be an astronaut when she grew up. Instead, she's the Regional Director of Cabin Experience and Revenue Analysis at **Boeing** Commercial Airplanes, with a background in psychology and design — and, yes, NASA — working on airline and spaceship cabin interiors.

“The most exciting project that I’ve worked on to date was the design of the CST-100 Starliner interior lighting package and commercial concept interiors, as well as airplane interior concepts based on research we conducted in emerging countries,” Ornan-Stone tells Runway Girl Network. “I firmly believe that part of my job is to question everything, and I’m on a personal mission to erase words and thoughts related to ‘we’ve always done it this way’ from the industry. When we give ourselves permission to explore the human side of the flying experience, in tandem with number crunching and data analysis, we uncover the most meaningful opportunities. The human experience of flying not only taps into magic, fun, grand possibilities, and adventure, it improves economies, can be a great democratizer of people, and helps bring the world together.”

A day in the life of Rachelle Ornan-Stone involves a lot of work bringing Boeing's airline customers together with the airframer. "The biggest challenge I have is to convince the aero industry that there is money, value, revenue to be earned by paying close attention to passenger and crew experience and the design of cabin interiors. Boeing airplanes and spacecraft are not really that different from any other product you or I can purchase today," Ornan-Stone notes, joking in an aside that it's true "except for the fact that few of us can afford them as individuals".

Boeing's Rachelle Ornan-Stone

Making the airline passenger experience both feel like any other purchase and revelling in its uniqueness is all part of the challenge for Ornan-Stone and her team. "When we shop for clothes, cars, kitchen devices, tools, mousetraps, you name it, we inevitably get swayed by packaging, form factor, materials selection, industrial design, human factors, usability, beauty, and let's be honest here, by our own aspirational goals and dreams related to the purchase. I spend most of my time talking, encouraging, engaging in cross-collaboration exercises, to bring the most free-thinking creative minds inside and outside our industry together to work towards this effort."

A big part of getting those creative minds to come up with brilliant ideas is ensuring a wide range of people are working on them.

"Both the job and the team are extremely diverse," Ornan-Stone notes. "Our team has four core members right now as well as 'rotational members'. The position within the company can be very public-facing so we have many interested parties expressing the desire to learn more and work with us. My core teammates hail from a variety of backgrounds: two have direct airline experience in passenger revenue and cabin experience, one has structures and composite materials knowledge, and then there's me with a psychology, design and NASA background. A large part of our job requires consulting with airlines, applying qualitative and quantitative methods to optimize the aircraft cabin for revenue. We support new product development efforts related to the cabin, and serve as the face of Boeing interiors at external events like conferences and media engagements."

Boeing's Rachelle Ornan-Stone working on spacecraft

Ornan-Stone's own background is fascinating. "I studied neuroscience with a focus on zero-g environments as an undergraduate, and in graduate school I pursued a PhD in Human Factors & Experimental Psychology, and a Master's in Industrial Design with a focus on transportation design. I knew that I'd never be completely happy in an academic environment because the fun and self-fulfillment for me comes from the entire process of conducting research, and applying the learnings to real product and experience design. By working at Boeing, I've been able to apply my knowledge and expertise to nearly every piece of the aircraft interior with which a passenger or crew members might interact."

"I wanted to be an astronaut when I grew up," Ornan-Stone says, "which is still true! As I got a bit older and wiser, I realized that hanging my hat on a remote possibility would be disappointing in the long run, despite the benefit of having a great cocktail party conversation opener. I explored other areas. As a youngster, I had always loved environmental design and learning about people and why we act the way we do. I struggled to understand how I could combine many areas of interest until a seminal moment as a Space Camp counselor as a 20-year old. The curriculum repeated bi-weekly and each camping cohort completed their experience with a grand finale simulation on a Space Shuttle mockup. No matter the culture, no matter the person, I noticed every kid missing a particular flip switch on their Space Shuttle cockpit shut-down procedures."

Suddenly it occurred to me that hardware positioning, design of interiors, human behavior and experience were all related! I felt so enlightened and, of course, thought I had discovered it all by myself. I learned the names of the fields which most closely represented my interests (human factors and industrial design) and soon thereafter began consuming experiences related to psychology in unique environments, design constraints, space and aesthetics, including a new passion towards outdoor adventuring.”

In that outdoor adventure spirit, Ornan-Stone is clear that a variety of experiences guided her along the paths — both literal and figurative — that led her to where she is today. If she were giving advice to someone considering a career in her field, “I’d advise them that I got here by self-reflection, and turning over every rock to discover my true interests. The second thing I’d mention is that there aren’t that many jobs out there just like this one. To enter a niche field, you must always be willing to find creative ways to forge ahead. This includes not letting your current job description define who you are. Work the edges of the jobs you have. It’s not unusual to gain employer permission to dip your toe in the water of your truer interests while you are in a current job.”

For young people, Ornan-Stone says, “for now, pay close attention to the parts of your life that you enjoy most. In school, when are you most happy – at play, when are you most happy? Other questions to ask of yourself: are you more of an analytical type, or do you prefer to take more of an emotional approach? When planning your career, be sure you honor your preferred style of processing rather than live according to how your formal education system has trained you.”

“In this day and age, the value of intersection of disciplines is more useful than pursuing one path relentlessly. Never overvalue the importance of remaining open, active, experimental and curious,” Ornan-Stone emphasises, recommending a seminal 1982 paper by Albert Bandura paper entitled “[The Psychology of Chance Encounters and Life Paths](#)”.

More widely, Ornan-Stone enthuses, “become a consumer of experiences, use all of your senses, all the time. See, smell, touch and feel as if it were the first time. Become fluid in your ability to put yourself in others’ shoes, while referencing your own experience archives. Walk through life as a scientist, and a designer. Spend more time observing, listening and doing, rather than talking. Finally, if any of this resonates with you, reach out and say hello. If you want to be an experience designer, which is really what I consider myself to be, you’ll know you’re on the right path if you lead an active, exhausting, and wonderfully full life.”

Sound advice for us all.

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