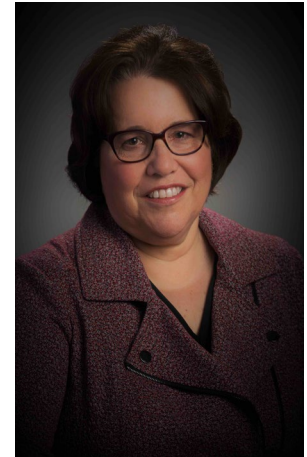


MEET A CONECT MEMBER BCO: Michelle Darling, BJ's Wholesale Club Inc.

Many international trade and transportation professionals enter the industry by chance, but Michelle Darling's career path was more unusual than most. Originally she was a professional photographer, but a series of geographical moves, educational decisions, and a chance temp assignment eventually brought her to BJ's Wholesale Club Inc. in Westborough, Mass. More than two decades later, she is BJ's Director of International Transportation, with a portfolio that encompasses transportation and customs compliance.



With 5.5 million members and \$12.7 billion in annual sales, BJ's operates 219 warehouse club stores on the U.S. East Coast. The stores offer discounted prices on grocery products, general merchandise, apparel, electronics, and other consumer goods. The company also offers a variety of e-commerce shopping and delivery options as well as gas and travel services.



BJ's imports more than 9,000 containers annually, from 20 countries, with 87% originating in China. It has three U.S. distribution centers (DCs), in Burlington, N.J.; Uxbridge, Mass.; and Jacksonville, Fla. More than half (59%) of its imports enter at the Port of New York/New Jersey, while 22% moves through the Port of Boston, 18% via Jacksonville, Fla., and the remaining 1% through Savannah, Ga., or the West Coast.

CONECT asked Darling about her job responsibilities, her career history, what she likes (or not) about transportation.

Q: What are your top three job responsibilities?

A: I oversee customs and other government compliance for all imports. Of course, that means my responsibilities also include coordinating with freight forwarders and customs brokers worldwide and maintaining our relationships with them. We do direct contracting with ocean carriers, so I handle those contracts and relationships as well as those with some NVOs (ocean consolidators). My department is also responsible for all "final mile" trucking and delivery from the ports to our DCs.

All of that entails being the liaison with finance and accounts payable. I also communicate with the merchant teams to help them budget for ocean freight costs and for planning purposes—for instance, I can let them know that if they want a specific product in a DC by a particular date, here's when it needs to leave the factory.

Q: How did you get involved in international trade and/or transportation? What did you do before the job you are in now?

A: I went to school for photography, then managed a chain of one-hour photo labs and had a photo studio in Virginia. I went back to school to get a business degree, but my husband was in the Navy and was transferred to Puerto Rico. There really were no work opportunities there, so I opened a studio on the base. At the time, New Hampshire College (now Southern New Hampshire University) was offering classes to the military on site and allowed family members to take classes, so I completed my BA. Then the college offered me an internship, which allowed me to get an MBA.

When my husband retired and we moved back to Massachusetts—I grew up in Marlborough—I wanted to use my MBA. I got a job with a temp agency that landed me in the finance department at BJs. After three weeks that job was done, but BJ's said, "We like your work, so let's see if we can find something else for you to do." They put me in logistics for a year, and then asked if I would be interested in reorganizing the international transportation function. That was 21 years ago; at that time BJ's imported about 500 containers a year—now we bring in 9,000-plus containers annually. So I started as a clerk and moved my way up to manager and now director.

Q: What do you like best about your work?

A: What I like about international transportation is how dynamic it is. Just when you think you've seen it all, something new happens—the first time a container goes overboard, a factory flooding out, the China tariffs—and then you get a pandemic! Some are big issues and others are not, and they may be things that just unexpectedly happen and there's not much you can do except respond. I will never say "never" in this industry. Nothing amazes me anymore!

I also like to travel. In addition to traveling because of my husband's career in the Navy, I have been to China seven times, Vietnam twice, and Taiwan once. I get to talk to people in Rotterdam and to ship containers from Africa. I think that part of my job is exciting.

Q: What is the most challenging part of your job?

A: I'd say it's dealing with the global impact of what's happening now. You have to be ready at any given moment for anything, like COVID-19, and the China tariff issue that has changed the dynamics of how we manage international trade and transportation.

With COVID, first we had to manage a supply chain that totally shut down when China was hot with the virus. That all bubbled up around Chinese New Year, and the factories didn't open back up. We were trying to figure out how to recover from that when we were faced with closing down here and had to quickly move to working 100% remotely. I'm managing a team of people I haven't seen in person since March. Plus this industry is built on face-to-face meetings and negotiations, but we had to close contracts by communicating by telephone, email, and Zoom meetings. No one could have predicted the challenges we're facing, but I think we're all smarter about some things now. We found better, streamlined ways to do things. We're fortunate that BJ's has been a wonderful company to work for through all this. First and foremost they care about the health and welfare of their employees.

Q: Please tell us about a work-related accomplishment you are especially proud of.

A: When I started, it was just me and one other person, a temp working for me. Now we're managing much more business in a much more complex world with a team of four people. People ask, how can you manage more than 9,000 containers with just four people, plus customs compliance? It's by being smart about it and automating, and finding the right business partners.

I'm most proud of identifying areas we could automate and make our work easier and more efficient, and then establishing those processes. It used to be all manual with paper and spreadsheets, but now we use online booking portals and electronic document sharing, and we can view documents from overseas online and send them to our customs broker's ftp site. When I look back at what we've been able to accomplish during the pandemic, I can't help thinking that if we were still in a paper environment we would be struggling.

And finally, BJ's is a member of Customs' CTPAT and ISA (Importer Self-Assessment) programs. I'm proud of those who worked on getting us certified and who are maintaining that status.

Q: What advice would you give to young people beginning their career in your field?

A: If they like work that's mundane and pretty much the same thing day after day, this is not the right job for them. International business is so dynamic, and it's changing all the time. We live in a world of globalization, so if you're interested in business, why not work in a global supply chain environment? I would also recommend this industry for the relationships and the wonderful people. People love it; they may move around to different companies or industry segments, but they stay for a long time.

Q: What are your personal interests or hobbies outside of work?

A: Photography is still a very big part of my life, but now my biggest "hobby" is my grandchildren, seven-year-old twins who live in Maine.

Q: How do you and your company benefit from CONECT membership?

A: CONECT is a unique organization that you don't find in other parts of the country. The meetings I attended and the connections I made helped train me 21 years ago when I was new. Now I find it valuable for my team members to continue their professional education through CONECT's programs. I go to the TPM conference on the West Coast every year. CONECT does just as good a job with its conferences; they're just on a smaller scale. The conference sessions and speakers are just as meaningful. I can't wait until we can all get back together again.

Interview has been edited and condensed.