

## FIRST-TIME CEO

# Amidon progresses in building association leadership legacy

*International Wood Products Association executive's small-business connection helps move her career forward*

By Michael Berman

Knowing where you want to be and getting to that place often takes perseverance. In the case of International Wood Products Association (IWPA) Executive Director Ashley Amidon, opportunity knocked twice. After beginning her career at IWPA as a lobbyist and returning as its leader in August 2022, Amidon's career has come full circle.

Now that she's in a leadership role, Amidon facilitates change by involving her community.

### Finding direction

Amidon's education prepared her for a political life: she earned a bachelor's in history and government and international affairs from George Mason University and a master's in international affairs from the University of Hull in England. But she had doubts, and a Capitol Hill internship confirmed them: that path would require accepting a lifestyle that was just too demanding.

Associations proved to be her real home. Starting in 2011 she served two years as manager of government relations and public affairs at IWPA, a trade association for the international wood industry focused on uniting supply chains. Then she gained experience at other organizations, including serving as executive director of the North Carolina Pest Management Association and vice president of public policy for the National Pest Management Association, before returning to IWPA for her current role.

Amidon's portfolio of work has included small business, tax, environmental and trade issues. As executive director at IWPA, she fosters supplier growth and consumer demand.

IWPA's members import wood used for many purposes, from guitars to home furnishings. The association has an international footprint and an impressive lineage.

"The vast majority of our members are the importers of record in North America, predominantly small businesses. We have a few that are larger, but most of them are multigenerational, family-owned businesses. There are some really old companies that date back to the late 1700s and early 1800s in our association. We also stretch back to over 30 countries around the world," Amidon said.

### A family history of business

Growing up with her father being the sole proprietor, Amidon has always understood the tools one needs to lead.

"I remember, even as a kid, being aware that it's a lot of work to run a business. It isn't a nine-to-five thing, it's something that you are always thinking about," she said.

Watching her father inspired Amidon to champion business owners. "I want to support and represent small businesses. I know that there are hundreds of people like my dad that are trying their best for their families and their employees," she said. "Helping with that effort is rewarding."

Maintaining a community of small and larger businesses at IWPA gives Amidon that opportunity.

### Lobbyist to leadership

For Amidon, the transition from lobbyist to executive has been a way to combine her love of politics with her natural leadership orientation. Her tenure as executive director of a smaller, regional organization was an intense learning experience and, she said, a useful step to where she is now.

"In that sort of management style, you have other people you can go to that are in-house and be like, 'Hey, we've got this thing. I don't quite know how to handle it. Have you guys had that?' It was immediate help," she said.

"So that, for me personally, was really helpful, because it's almost like training wheels. And I don't mean that in a derogatory sense at all because that association was wonderful. But it was a way to have more support as a CEO."

Amidon's current position requires the sort of judgment that comes from experience. "When you're CEO, the buck stops with you. When I moved into (my current role), it was like, 'Oh, I've run board meetings before. That's no problem.' I've run the committee process, we've done meetings. I had that experience to draw on," she said.

### Refreshing tradition

After accepting her executive role at IWPA, Amidon reexamined and updated many of the group's standard ways of operating.

"An example: our convention every year. Like every association does, we (would issue) a press release saying registration is open, populate the website, send a few emails, and that was it. For me, it was looking at, well, why aren't we being more aggressive with some of the marketing?"

So, she increased their marketing tactics, resulting in measurable improvement. "We saw literal jumps in registration in the couple of hours after new emails went out."

Amidon also saw the need for an internal communication revamp. She redid the employee handbook with input from staff, in keeping with her community-oriented leadership style.

### Words of wisdom

Early in her career, a colleague advised Amidon to "pick a hill to die on." As a result, she adopted a strategy of asserting herself on compliance and governance issues she felt were too important to yield on, but compromising on other issues.

Finally in the position that she aspired to hold, Amidon is thriving. "As an association, we are very small, but we are mighty. I just love coming to work every day. I've enjoyed other jobs, but I have never been as happy as I am now." ■

