



“Compared to other companies, we have more history and experience, so we would like to express Toyota’s character in the bZ series, including batteries.”

Kouji Toyoshima, chief engineer, Toyota ZEV Factory

AUTOMOTIVE NEWS ILLUSTRATION

The Toyota bZ4X electric midsize crossover will go on sale in mid-2022.

SAFE BET

With debut of electric crossover, Toyota emphasizes battery reliability, performance

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TOKYO — Toyota is banking on bulletproof batteries to help sell its new bZ4X electric crossover.

Japan’s largest carmaker is pitching safety, performance and peace of mind as key traits of the next-generation power packs that will underpin its first serious foray into the world of electric vehicles.

The gambit capitalizes on Toyota Motor Corp.’s sterling reputation for reliability. And the messaging could be a key differentiator for Toyota’s upcoming EVs in a rapidly expanding field of rivals, as



competitors such as General Motors and Hyundai Motor Group struggle with massive recalls of potentially defective and dangerous batteries.

In unveiling specifications for its new bZ4X midsize crossover last week, Toyota said safety and real-world range were the top priorities for the futuristically



Formula One-style steering is an option, above, for the bZ4X, which is built on Toyota’s e-TNGA platform.

styled EV, which kicks off a blitz of seven new battery-driven vehicles to be released under its new bZ subbrand by 2025.

The bZ4X’s 71.4-kilowatt-hour lithium ion battery and its 310-mile range are about on a par with the specs of competitors. But Toyota is emphasizing the intangible assets long baked into a brand

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Automotive News
**RETAIL FORUM:
DEALER DISCUSSIONS**

Workplace flexibility can boost diversity

Options could grow ranks of female techs, expert says

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For dealerships seeking to foster a culture of diversity, equity and inclusion, offering flexibility to employees and listening to their needs are places to start.

Take Erika Tiffani Wells, sales manager at Volkswagen of Marion in Illinois, for example.

Wells, who had been working in the Atlanta area, was approached by the Volkswagen store’s general manager via Facebook about coming to work at the southern Illinois dealership.

“At the time, I can’t say that I truly had an interest,” Wells said during an Automotive News Retail Forum: Dealer Discussions panel last week. “Atlanta is an aggressive market, the used cars were doing great, [I was] making some of the best money I’ve ever made in my career.”

But the general manager was persistent, Wells recalled, and asked her what was important to her.

“She found a niche that ended up becoming bigger than any pay plan I could have ever written out,” Wells said. “And that was for flexibility for my family.”

For Wells, being at the dealership 10 to 12 hours a day was taxing and exhausting. Her children were taking classes and doing homework at home because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“It was so hard to balance that,” Wells said. “And she basically asked me, ‘If I could give you work-life balance and I could give you the flexibility that you’re looking for, would you reconsider?’”

Wells did and ended up taking the job, which she’s been in for about two months now.

Cheryl Thompson, CEO at the Center for Automotive Diversity, Inclusion and Advancement, echoed the importance of flexibility in today’s workplace.

“I was a young single mother for many years, and I just always wanted that flexibility,” Thompson said. “You would think it’s not that hard. But I think that people get stuck in their ways. They have always been used to doing things a certain way and it’s difficult to change, and we’re pushing against the status quo. I’m thrilled that’s the silver lining that the pandemic gave us. I just really hope that we don’t have amnesia and that we’re able to bring this flexibility forward and do even better when we can be intentional about it.”

Offering flexibility could also be a solution to a longtime industry pain point: a shortage of technicians.

Thompson pointed out that just 1 percent of dealership technicians were female, according to the 2019 NADA Workforce Study. And as dealerships across the country face a tightening labor market, hiring more female technicians could be an opportunity for change.



Wells: Workers’ priorities matter



Thompson: Need to do even better

Awaiting verdict, Kelly ‘not nervous’

Ex-Nissan director faces prison time in Japan

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TOKYO — After making his final plea of innocence, former Nissan director Greg Kelly now begins the long wait for a verdict in a trial widely seen as a proxy case for ousted boss Carlos Ghosn.

If the three-judge panel accepts Kelly’s defense argument, the human re-

sources executive could finally be heading home to Tennessee, more than three years after his surprise arrest upon landing in Japan for a business trip. If not, Kelly could be spending another two years here locked in prison.

Despite the Japanese justice system’s vaunted 99 percent conviction rate, Kelly kept his chin up.

“To be honest, I’m not nervous,” Kelly said outside the Tokyo District Court on Oct. 27 after his defense team made its closing argument. “I know what happened. Others know what happened. We’ve got documents that show what happened. And there was no crime.”

Lead defense attorney Yoichi Kitamura closed by telling the court that no



Kelly: ‘There was no crime.’

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AROUND THE AUTO WORLD

Here are edited highlights from the latest episodes of "Daily Drive," *Automotive News'* weekday podcast, hosted by Steve Schmith and Jamie Butters.



"That's a big deal for Our Next Energy because that is a firm that does not place small bets; it only bets on companies that it thinks can really scale globally."

Automotive News reporter Pete Bigelow on Breakthrough Energy Ventures' investment in Michigan battery startup Our Next Energy

"Autonomous driving is one of these technologies that really come once in a generation and I think will really reshape our lives."



Cyngn CEO Lior Tal on his firm's efforts to roll out self-driving technology in the industrial sector before bringing it to the open road



"We are trying to optimize power for an electrified world. So we're really trying to think about different solutions that use minimum energy and

provide maximum results for our future."

Exro CEO Sue Ozdemir on the Canadian motor technology firm's mission

"There's tremendous momentum in digital retailing. It's not a secret that nine out of 10 customers have started online, and that's been a trend that has been increasing for over a decade now."

CarSaver CEO Chad Collier on online vehicle sales

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Dandridge: Do more for women.



Varela: "We don't listen ... enough."

FORUM

Be better listeners, panelists suggest

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"Let me just say this: Opportunity, opportunity, opportunity and flexibility, flexibility, flexibility," said Myra Dandridge, the National Automobile Dealers Association's executive director of external affairs and public policy.

"I think that those are two very important words when we're talking about growing the female base of technicians that we have, because there is opportunity there but we can do better and we are doing better. We should create and develop apprenticeship programs that are just for women so that they are able to come in and to learn the business, advance in the business as well, and also, more importantly, to make sure that the schedules are flexible and also to make sure that there is equity and parity in the pay structure for women."

Listening — whether during an interview or in everyday settings with employees — is important, panelists said.

"I think sometimes we don't listen to people enough," said Fernando Varela, CEO of Varela Auto Group in Texas. "If you have a job posting, you have in your mind what you're looking for real quick. And you tend to discard people pretty fast. Sometimes you don't see their personality. They might not have the qualifications for the job you're looking [for], so you don't listen to what they're trying to tell you and you dismiss them."

Varela said listening to people and spending more time getting to know them as individuals is something his group is trying to implement.

Wells said employers need to understand that employees are driven by different priorities, much like how customers have different reasons for a vehicle purchase.

"When we start listening to them, having empathy and figuring out what is important to them, then we'll be able to speak to them more authentically and being able to have those employees bring their best selves," Wells said. **AN**

DE&I tips

Here are some tips from Center for Automotive Diversity, Inclusion and Advancement CEO Cheryl Thompson on bringing diversity, equity and inclusion to the workplace:

- Be intentional in expanding the talent pool
- Educate on conscious and unconscious bias
- Use mentoring as a win-win
- Encourage leaders to be sponsors
- Challenge your own biases
- Your culture is defined by the worst behavior you tolerate
- Remain flexible

Automotive News
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From the dealership to the C-suite, individuals who fight for diversity, equity and inclusion in the automotive industry are making a powerful impact.

In the December 27th Yearbook edition of *Automotive News*, we'll recognize industry leaders who embrace diversity and bring change to their organizations.

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