60 Seconds with ... Mikela Chatzimichailidou



Mikela is a Professor at University College London (UCL); a leading researcher of all things technical and a consulting engineer bringing together experience and expertise from across healthcare, transportation and infrastructure in the fields of systems engineering and integration, safety assurance, complexity management, product design and innovation.

She has been leading research and consulting assignments for more than a decade both in academia for some of the world's top universities, and in industry for world-class built environment consultancies.

During her career she has worked in both hands-on R&D roles, consultancy and design roles and as a project and engineering manager, leading others to deliver client objectives and cutting edge academic research. Mikela therefore brings experience of both the academic and industrial worlds, bridging the gap and drawing the best from each.

What first attracted you to working in the field of System Safety?

I've always been fascinated by people; how we make decisions, take risks, and interact with one another. System Safety offered me the chance to help people on a larger scale, to understand human behaviour in complex environments, and to make systems safer not just technically, but for the humans who rely on them every day.

What aspect of your career are you most proud of?

I'm proud of working at the crossroads of academia, industry, and policy. It's where research meets practice, and where insights turn into action that genuinely protects people. Being able to bridge these worlds and see ideas make a tangible difference is incredibly rewarding.

Tell us one interesting unusual fact about yourself!

When I was five, someone asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, and I said "Prime Minister." Even though I didn't take that exact path, it reflects a mindset I've carried ever since: aim high, dream boldly, and don't shy away from challenges that seem bigger than you. That was back in the early 90s – not sure how well our politicians do today...

What advice would you give to yourself age 12?

I'd tell my younger self: never stop dreaming. Focus on the bigger picture, not just what's right in front of you. Being a dreamer isn't naïve, it's essential. The key to a fulfilling career is holding onto your curiosity, imagination, and willingness to pursue what may seem impossible.

What future changes would you like to see in the field of System Safety?

We need to embrace change and complexity rather than resist it. Complexity isn't the enemy, it's the world we live in. The challenge is to navigate it thoughtfully, adapt quickly, and find ways to work with systems rather than against them. That mindset is no longer optional; it's essential for shaping a safer future.

What's your most favourite quote or motto?

"*Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.*" (A. Einstein) It's a reminder to keep questioning, try new approaches, and never settle for doing things just because *"that's how they've always been done"."*

If you could learn to do anything, what would it be?

I'd study forensics. I've always been fascinated by puzzles, mysteries, and uncovering how events unfold or why accidents happen. There's a strong connection to safety: understanding human behaviours helps us prevent risks or encourage good practices, and the detective mindset sharpens your ability to spot patterns and connections that others might overlook.

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If you could be any fictional character, whom would you choose?

Popeye for his determination, resilience, and unshakable optimism. There's something inspiring about a character who faces challenges head-on, never gives up, and still finds joy along the way. A little spinach-powered optimism never hurts!

How do you see the rise of Artificial Intelligence affecting the future of safety engineering?

AI is just the latest in a long line of disruptive technologies. The question isn't whether AI will change our work – it will – but whether we remain critical thinkers, creators of value, and socially responsible engineers. We do, as long as we resist shortcuts, use AI thoughtfully, and remember that insight and judgement still comes from people, not algorithms.