The importance of gender diversity in construction

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**Forward-thinking, ethical businesses with strong core values are already striving to achieve gender diversity and inclusivity. This is because they recognise it is the right thing to do and understand the value it provides organisations and sectors.**

The body of research supporting the value of diversity is broad and compelling. It is now recognised that more diverse companies and teams are more innovative, collaborative, and financially successful. Despite the national importance of the construction industry (contributing over £100bn of Gross Domestic Product annually), analysis of recent Office of National Statistics (ONS) data highlights the stark contrast between the gender diversity of the national and construction workforces in the United Kingdom (Figure 1).

The National Infrastructure Pipeline contains over 700 projects and programmes, with a combined value in excess of £500bn. With a number of major projects and programmes already underway, this pipeline offers fantastic opportunities, but also comes with challenges. Arguably, the most pressing challenge is the significant and widely-recognised skills shortages. With 50 percent of the pipeline due to be delivered through private investment and the extent of the impact of Brexit unclear, it is imperative for UK infrastructure to continue to maintain its position as an attractive investment proposition. Therefore, the industry needs to attract from a broader and more diverse resource pool to maintain confidence in its ability to deliver this pipeline successfully.

Frontier clients are beginning to make strides to attain the benefits of true collaboration. This includes the expansion of alliancing models at Anglian Water and the increasing importance being placed on behavioural assessment for large scale procurements, including the procurement of Heathrow’s Programme Client, and HS2’s Phase 1 Civils Main Works. However, issues persist. For example, only 53 percent of respondents in Turner & Townsend’s latest Commercial Performance Study agreed that the Client/Tier 1 relationship was positive and based on collaborative principles.

Collaboration will always fundamentally rely on having the right mix of people working together. A considerable volume of research suggests that gender diversity greatly improves collaboration, and so any drive towards greater collaboration must include, and be supported by, increased gender diversity at all levels.
Attracting from a broader talent base

Initiatives aimed at improving the gender balance of the construction industry predominantly focus on making it more attractive. It is now widely recognised that to be attractive to a diverse talent pool, the image of the industry needs an overhaul. For many, ‘construction’ conjures up images of dust, muddy puddles and male site workers in hi-vis jackets.

The construction industry has historically been very poor at self-promotion, so many do not realise the opportunities available. With technological developments and an increased focus on social responsibility, the breadth of potential careers in construction is expanding. So, working with the next generation to explain the diversity of interesting careers available, and providing visibility of both male and female role models doing these jobs, is crucial.

The introduction of the Design Engineer Construct accredited learning programme is welcome, as is the growing number of Science Technology Engineering Mathematics (STEM) Ambassadors volunteering in schools with construction related backgrounds, and the range of schemes running such as ‘Building Girls Up’ which runs workshops with females ages 16-18 in London to encourage them to consider a career in construction.

Lessons learned from the finance sector

As the construction industry begins to strive for greater gender diversity, it is important to draw on the experiences of other industries which are further along on the same journey. The finance industry, for example, began this journey 30 to 40 years ago and so provides a good source of lessons learned.

Predictably, attracting from a broader talent base has traditionally been the focus of the efforts of the finance industry. School outreach and mentoring programmes are now commonplace to encourage young females to apply to apprentice and graduate programmes. This focus has delivered results, with women accounting for roughly half of graduate intakes at most big City employers and approximately 43 percent of the financial and insurance activities sector workforce as a whole.

Although it would seem logical to assume that ensuring an equal gender split of apprentice and graduates into the industry would, over time, resolve the issues of imbalance at all levels, this is not the case. The executive summary of the 2014 Davies’ Report reads: “Women are as successful as their male counterparts at university and in their early careers, but attrition rates increase significantly as they progress through their careers”. A study by the Financial Times supports this, finding that despite almost equal numbers of staff overall across the top City employers, only circa 20 percent of senior roles are held by women.

The finance industry has awoken to the fact that it is not good enough just to attract talent initially, it is fundamental to create an environment where everyone can thrive irrespective of their gender. The ‘Women in Finance: Is Parity a Pipedream?’ paper produced by the Young Fabian Society is just one of many recent publications which recognise the lack of senior representation in the finance industry, pointing to the same root cause of senior attrition: working culture and company policy.

Unsurprisingly, addressing working culture and policy to increase retention and attract senior
females has come into sharp focus in the finance industry more recently, with industry leaders providing some of the most progressive policies around. This includes the provision of mentoring schemes and access to senior female role models, destigmatised flexible working policies, and impressive improvements to maternity/paternity and child care schemes.

Goldman Sachs’ Fleet Street office, for example, has an on-site childcare facility which provides an infant transition programme for parents returning to work following maternity leave, emergency back-up childcare, an after school and holiday programme and full time care for children up to age three. Sally Boyle, the international head of human resources, says “We’ve definitely seen it have an impact on retention of ... women who wouldn’t have stayed I suspect if they hadn’t been able to manage that childcare in a way that they can here”.

Alliance Trust began offering generous maternity benefits in 2008, including a 10 percent cash bonus to mothers who return to work up to a year after having a baby. This is held as a key factor in its senior gender balance, including a 60 percent female board. Moreover, since the introduction of legislation in April 2015 to allow fathers, partners and adopters to opt for shared parental leave, this is also being recognised as crucial. EY, PwC and Deloitte are among the large accountancy firms taking steps to improve paternity packages and encourage shared parental leave.

What are the lessons for construction?
Increasing the gender diversity of the construction industry is critical to driving improved commercial performance, innovation and collaboration. The combination of skills shortages, an extensive pipeline of works and the need to demonstrate capability and value to investors provides a burning platform, which must be used to catalyse a collective step-change in efforts to drive greater diversity.

The construction industry must recognise that in order to achieve greater gender diversity a two-pronged approach is required:

1. Attracting the next generation of female industry professionals and
2. Creating a working environment and culture which allows female talent to thrive and is attractive to women of all levels.

Great work is being done to attract the next generation of professionals, and we must continue to drive these initiatives forwards. However, there is still more to do in developing the policies collectively offered, and improving working culture by tackling unconscious bias and sexism. There is growing recognition of the importance of gender diversity within academia, professional bodies and (to some extent) professional service organisations, but it is imperative that this is also driven down throughout the supply chain so the impact and benefits are felt at site level.

This is a topic which is rightly gaining more coverage, and is increasingly becoming a key issue at the forefront of many leading organisations’ thinking. However, it is not good enough to assume that merely talking about these issues will solve them. Instead, the businesses taking bold, proactive and innovative action with regards to gender diversity are those which are really generating and shaping significant industry change.

Moreover, it is up to all of us at all levels of the industry to ensure that we:

- understand the business case for diversity properly
- are aware of the implications of unconscious bias
- support and work to de-stigmatise flexible working and enhanced maternity/paternity policies
- challenge sexist behaviour in the same way that we would challenge behaviour which was patently unsafe or dangerous

Fundamentally, it is futile to attempt to address the gender balance in construction by convincing the next generation that the industry is now one in which women can thrive and progress, without also striving to ensure that this is, in fact, the reality.
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