

GENDER BALANCE - THREE THINGS THAT WORK

Highlights from the Major Projects Association event held on **25th May 2016**

The potential for improving gender balance is often discussed in the major projects environment, but in the fourth meeting of its gender balance initiative the Major Projects Association decided to move the conversation forward. Rather than focus on what might work in the future, major project companies HS2, Royal Mail Group, Afiniti and PwC discussed successful initiatives that were already underway, delivering real benefits that could be transferred successfully to other workplaces.

REVERSE MENTORING – UNDERSTANDING NEW PERSPECTIVES

Embarking upon a programme of reverse mentoring has pushed the profile of diversity and inclusion to the very top of the agenda at professional services firm PwC. The structured programme, which began two years ago, has seen company leaders mentored by junior staff from a different gender or ethnic background in order to show partners what life is like from a very different perspective. It was mandatory for all partners, which sent a powerful message to staff at all levels within the company.

As a direct result of the initiative there have been very practical and real changes in the business. A deeper consideration of gender and ethnic mix is becoming embedded into the processes behind recruitment, project team creation, external event participation and talent development.

'The initiative has helped our leaders understand life at PwC from a completely different perspective – that of someone significantly more junior to them, and from either a different gender or ethnic background to them. We've seen the emotional insight from our mentors' lived experiences change the behaviours and perspectives of our leaders – they are now actively more inclusive.'

Andy Woodfield, Partner, PwC Leader of the Reverse Mentoring Initiative

'It was a massive challenge to the mentor, as you are subverting the natural hierarchies. You ask yourself, "Is my experience valuable? Will I be brave enough to share it?" – ultimately I was.'

Evie John, Mentor, PwC

'Gender balance and diversity are much more firmly and authentically on the agenda now, and are championed by all of our leaders.'

Steve Crook, Partner, PwC



FLEXIBLE WORKING – POLICY IS NOT ENOUGH

As the project director of a major parcel transformation programme at Royal Mail Group, Pauline Broadway knew that it would be challenging to combine the huge responsibility with her need for flexible working. Having been trusted by Royal Mail Group to deliver at this high level, Pauline set about critically analysing how she and the team would operate, which meant a clear definition of accountabilities and putting in place what she described as a rhythm and routine that worked for the whole team. Communication was crucial, as was the need to ensure that flexibility was retained on both sides of the arrangement.

Through this experience, and in her current role as Business Change Director at business change consultancy firm Afiniti, Pauline said that it was vital to ensure that flexible working policies are properly supported within organisations, for example through coaching and empowering employees to be open about their flexible working requirements.

Royal Mail Group's Chief Operating Officer Sue Whalley said that the company was still on the journey of improving its flexible working policies, which was one of many major steps that the 500-year-old organisation had taken to improve diversity and inclusion. Driven by the need to innovate and grow, the 140,000-employee-strong company took a strategic decision three years ago to improve business performance by growing diversity. It has made huge changes to its recruitment procedures, undertaken unconscious bias training among senior staff, changed its training programmes and is working hard on retention of female employees.

'Flexible working policies are great, but they have to be supported by a coaching process. If you have a flexible working policy, review the process, review the way that it is rolled out within your organisation.'

Pauline Broadway, Business Change Director, Afiniti

'We had to do a root and branch review of how we recruit – what we call the jobs, and how we portray them. We took a really bold decision to implement balance shortlisting. That has made a huge difference, because in a year we have doubled the percentage of new joiners that are women into the organisation.'

Sue Whalley, Chief Operating Officer, Royal Mail Group

LEADERSHIP – GIVING PEOPLE A SAFE SPACE TO FLOURISH

Change presents opportunity, said Dr Nina Cope, Organisational Effectiveness and Change Director at HS2. Highlighting the experiences of three female employees that she has led, Nina demonstrated how giving people a safe space to flourish benefited both the individuals and the organisation. These experiences also demonstrated that building confidence is just as vital as providing opportunities.

Ali, a chartered occupational therapist, was a senior employee who had always been placed in facilitative roles rather than given the chance to lead. In enabling Ali to take up a leadership position she was challenged in new ways, and although this was difficult it gave her a large number of new skills.

Barbara too was given the chance to lead a project management office. As a mature member of the team, Barbara embraced this new opportunity and undertook training courses that enabled her to perform at this new vocation late in her career. The results were incredible. As an effective employee Barbara became an 'awesome' team manager that everyone wanted to work with.

Finally, Kate was supported to ensure that she could flourish in her demanding role, delivering a human resources change programme which included making redundancies. As a young female employee there was some discrimination from the parties involved, yet Kate did an amazing job.

'All of these people flourished with new opportunity; the biggest barrier was actually a bit about themselves. We had to spend time with our people to ensure that confidence flourishes. We ignore that confidence question at our peril.'

Dr Nina Cope, Organisational Effectiveness and Change Director, HS2

Lively debate followed an observation made by Sue Whalley that in her experience very capable women were just giving up and not demonstrating the 'grit' required to move up into senior roles. This was partly about individuals and partly about companies creating the right leadership environment, she said.

Nina Cope responded with the view that people with families are among the most resilient employees in the world, but they may choose not to apply that in the workplace and the question that needed to be asked was 'why?' If it was a confidence issue then companies need to shape their style around the people.

POINTS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

- Employees that work flexibly or part-time are often judged unfairly and assumed to be less committed than full-time staff. What can be done to change this?
- Does your organisation allow people to step into new opportunities and flourish?
- How can career progression be managed to ensure that those who work flexibly or part-time are being promoted?
- Are women giving up too easily when it comes to promotion? Do they need to become more resilient?

more  Major Projects Association Gender Balance Initiative

With grateful thanks to PwC for hosting this event.

Chair:

Andy Woodfield, Partner, PwC

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Dr Nina Cope, Organisational Effectiveness and Change Director, HS2
Steve Crook, Partner, PwC
Evie John, Mentor, PwC
Sue Whalley, Chief Operating Officer, Royal Mail Group
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Participating Organisations:

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CJ Associates

Copper Consultancy
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