

# THE RETENTION AND PROMOTION CHALLENGE



Highlights from the Major Projects Association event held on **13th July 2016**

Retention and promotion of female employees is the biggest gender balance challenge faced by organisations in the major projects sector. Firms are reporting growing success in attracting female graduates and apprentices but they are not having the same success maintaining the gender balance over time. By examining the reasons for this failure, studying best practice in the industry and discussing actions that can be taken by individuals and organisations, the Major Projects Association sought to support firms in tackling one of the biggest issues in Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) today.

## MAINTAINING PROPORTIONALITY

Event hosts KPMG have been working hard on this challenge, which began with the organisation examining its data and finding that although it was achieving a balanced intake in terms of gender, only 15% of partners were female. The organisation then modelled its talent pipeline, discovering that without systemic change the imbalance would only become more severe.

*'We can see no reason why we should not be promoting in proportion to the talent pool available for each role. So we have really looked to identify and mitigate barriers to progression where we recognise that progression is not proportionate to available talent.'*

Lisa Kelvey, Associate Director, KPMG LLP

Importantly for KPMG this was not about introducing positive bias, it was about removing the systemic biases that were already in place to ensure that employees were promoted on merit. This meant challenging staff to consider everyone equally, and not only consider those who pursued promotion most aggressively. In regular talent pool meetings the company now discuss every individual in every team to review performance, potential, barriers and employee needs. Each vacancy is now advertised – moving away from a system of recommendations and creating a system of opportunity-led promotion. At the same time the organisation is constantly seeking to improve what it calls 'intelligent working', looking for solutions beyond the formalised job-sharing, flexible working and glide time.

Addressing structural issues around part-time roles is another way that companies can improve retention and progression of female employees. Dr Alison Parken of Cardiff University shared research from the **Women Adding Value to the Economy (WAVE)** programme, specifically related to the gender pay gap in public sector organisations in Wales.

Part-time working was at the heart of the gender pay gap, she said, with structural issues within companies resulting in failure for women to progress once they take a part-time role. In most organisations the stigma surrounding working part-time means that training, conferences and special project opportunities are limited and careers stall.

*'What we can clearly see is that women don't want to give up their careers, they want flexibility – but actually, because they have deviated from the full-time career path, a grade gap opens up and it is difficult to ever get back on track. This is essentially the heart of the issue, challenging assumptions around working part-time in terms of career aspirations.'*

Dr Alison Parken, Senior Research Fellow, Cardiff University

## CLOSING THE GAP

As part of the WAVE programme Welsh public sector organisations have introduced a series of change actions designed to close the gender pay gap and ensure that women are moving into higher-skilled, more senior roles appropriate to their qualifications and experience.

These include:

- Job shadowing
- Generic service roles to remove the gender bias
- 'Ready for promotion' schemes where promotion boards pursue progression on behalf of individuals – ensuring that people are encouraged for promotion even if they do not nominate themselves
- Offering permanent and full-time vacancies to part-time and bank employees
- Unconscious bias training
- Leadership training programmes for women
- Returners' programmes

The value of 'return to work' programmes was also highlighted by major project organisations Tideway and HS2. London Tideway's much publicised aspiration for gender parity by the end of construction in 2023 has led to creative thinking from the organisation. In 2015 it had 250 applicants to its new, 12-week paid internship for returners. Seven women participated and all were offered permanent roles at the end of the scheme. In 2016 the organisation repeated the initiative and invited main works contractors to participate too. Of the eight women taking part in 2016, five will be working within contracting firms.

On the HS2 scheme, Head of EDI for the project, Mark Lomas, said that a recent event for returners had really taken off, with 100 women signing up to attend a coffee morning at short notice and the 35 spaces filling up straightaway with women who all have suitable skills and talents. He said that four further planned events were filling up so quickly that he did not believe that there was a lack of female candidates. The issue was that firms are not doing enough to attract female staff.

*'Let's be clear. You will not win work with HS2 if you don't take EDI seriously. We expect to see different models of recruitment, not the same tired selection processes which have led to the skills gap that we have. That might mean skills trials, apprenticeships, situational judgement tests and other ways of selection. We will be holding contractors to account for what they put in tenders and when they subcontract work.'*

Mark Lomas, Head of EDI, HS2 Ltd

Lomas called on everyone in the industry to do more to address gender balance, starting at the very top of organisations. To this end HS2 has absorbed accountability for EDI at Board level, with individuals incorporating this into their pay-related performance criteria.

#### TARGET DRIVEN

An area where the Tideway project differs from other major projects is in the widely publicised gender parity target that it is seeking to achieve by 2023. Currently the 400-strong organisation has 36% female staff, and its decision to set hard targets stimulated much debate.

Achieved 36%



Siân Thomas, Head of Asset Management, Tideway

*'Obviously there is a huge debate about targets and how important targets can be. Our targets aren't there just for the sake of being there, they are there to encourage our contractors to reach out to people who might not otherwise work in engineering and construction and get to where we want to go.'*

Siân Thomas, Head of Asset Management, Tideway

*'I am absolutely a supporter of targets. This is about levelling the playing field not tipping the playing field, and unless it happens at every level in an organisation you are never going to develop the pipeline that will change the power base at the top of organisations.'*

Dr Meryl Bushell, Non-Executive Director

*'Our world is littered with targets that don't work, from banking bonuses to health service queues. You just end up dragging people in from other organisations, and actually to solve the problem you have to solve the whole piece right the way through. Targets are almost always lagging indicators which attract behaviours that motivate meeting the targets, and they invariably result in more negative outcomes and impacts than intended; it is a great shame, because people set them with the best of intent.'*

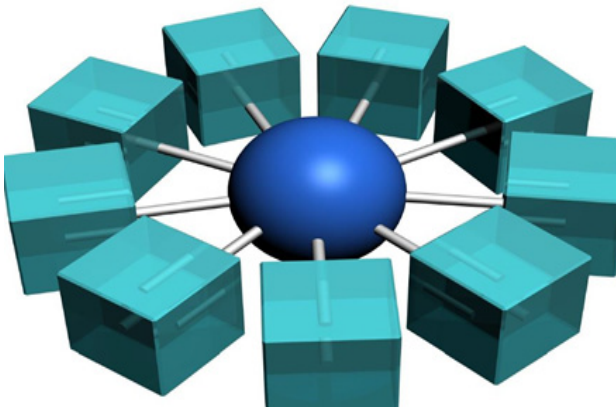
Steve Fox CBE, Chief Executive, BAM Nuttall Ltd

#### NETWORKING UP

Although some companies are introducing more transparency into their promotion structures the reality of progression to senior levels within many organisations is that personal recommendations are vital. Research by Dr Meryl Bushell, an executive coach who also works at the Cabinet Office, highlighted the different approaches that men and women take to networking in the context of career progression. In an environment where 30% to 60% of jobs are spread by word of mouth, Bushell noted that it is a very good thing to have a wide network of 'weak ties', such as former colleagues and alumni that you may be in contact with every six months. Stressing the importance of being central to that network, Meryl explained that the better the quality of the network with more senior influential people – which means more men due to the gender imbalance at senior levels – the more senior the emerging job opportunities will be.

Being central to the network allows you to both act as a useful bridge between others and allows you to broker information for your own use.

## Centrality



Dr Meryl Bushell, Non-Executive Director

When studying the difference in networks between Board level men and women Bushell found that men were more proactive and built more influential networks. For example all of the men had kept in contact with senior people from former workplaces, but only one of the women that she interviewed had done this. The majority of men did proactive relationship management with their contacts. The women did not. Most of the men were active on the business social circuit, considering it was important for them personally and good for business as well. Women were more task-focused, concentrating on the job in hand and less likely to attend such events. When looking for jobs women tended to follow the formal process, for example using headhunters, attending career-related events and training. Men approach their network first and ask for sponsorship before going to headhunters – by which point the headhunters have already heard of them. By not engaging in the existing process, where recommendation from influential people is crucial, women historically have missed out, Bushell explained.

### HOW INDIVIDUALS CAN IMPROVE THEIR CHANCES OF PROMOTION

- Review networking activities
- Audit contacts
- Send catch-up emails to former bosses and colleagues
- Invest time in informal networking
- Tell people what you are looking for
- Ask for sponsorship
- Keep notes on contacts
- Use LinkedIn
- Enjoy it – appreciate it adds value and is not underhand

Source: Dr Meryl Bushell, Non-Executive Director

### DEBATE: CHANGE THE WOMEN OR CHANGE THE SYSTEM?

All panellists argued strongly that systemic change was necessary. Tom Pearce of the Talent and Workforce Data department at the Infrastructure and Projects Authority made the powerful argument that women should not be asked to change, pointing out that such a debate on other protected characteristics such as race or sexuality would not take place. Achieving systemic change requires strong, visible leadership to champion the cause, he said.

However Professor Linda Scott of Saïd Business School presented compelling evidence that showed both women and systems needed to make changes, in part due to the pervasive influence of 'stereotype threat'. This social theory describes the risk that individuals conform to **negative stereotypes about a social group**.

*'The concern is that the way we deal with stereotype threat creates these massive feedback loops where negative experiences feed back into poor performance. So I propose that the system and the woman are a continuous loop. And by the same token the man is the system too. So you have to do something with both sides if you are going to have equality.'*

Prof Linda Scott, Emeritus Professor, Saïd Business School

Author of the book *'Here & Now: how women get heard more at work and why it matters'*, Chris Davidson also argued that 'fixing the men' was key to gender balance. He also called on the audience to ban the term 'soft skills', explaining that there is nothing soft about communication, which has the power to make or break major projects.

Responding to an audience question on how women can convince men who may feel threatened by the potential for more women to be promoted, Davidson pointed out that men benefit from having more senior women in their organisations. This was echoed by Linda Scott who said that the accountability and focus of senior women encourages men to improve their own performance. Key to achieving this, said the panel, is developing all people equally. Take time to have career conversations with all staff and making employees across the company feel valued, while at the same time ensuring that there is no gender bias in the promotion structure.

Architect of the Environment Agency's (EA) Women's Network, Keela Shackell-Smith, said that in her view both change approaches are needed. With her slogan of 'Be the change you want to see,' Keela called on the audience to take action to address gender imbalance, and highlighted the benefits of creating a women's network, which should engage men too.

For the 2000 women in the EA women's network, confidence building was seen as a key requirement, so the organisation created a three-day workshop for members.

Other benefits include the fact that the network is now treated as a consultee on HR issues, giving women more influence, and the creation of a report on gender-specific terminology in the workplace is supporting men to challenge inequalities.

*'I say to myself – if I have time to moan, then I have time to act. What will you do tomorrow to be the change you want to see?'*

Keela Shackell-Smith, Co-Lead of the Cross Government Women's Network, Environment Agency

#### POINTS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- Do gender specific targets help or hinder the progression and retention of women in major projects?
- Should women change their approach to networking or does this feed into a biased system of promotion?
- How can men be encouraged to support steps to address systemic gender bias?

#### ACTIONS THAT ORGANISATIONS CAN TAKE TO ENCOURAGE RETENTION AND PROMOTION OF FEMALE EMPLOYEES

- Make it a priority for the leaders of the organisation
- Incorporate the **WISE industry-led 'Ten Steps'**
- Examine the data – where are the bottlenecks and where does proportionality drop off?
- Model the pipeline
- Consider all candidates for promotion equally
- Promote on merit ensuring that the definition of this is not affected by bias
- Use promotion boards to pursue progression on behalf of individuals
- Advertise all vacancies
- Employ intelligent flexible working options
- Maintain career progression for part-time employees
- Offer full-time or permanent roles to casual and part-time staff before advertising them
- Introduce returners' programmes
- Encourage women to undertake leadership training

**more** > Major Projects Association Gender Balance Initiative

With grateful thanks to **KPMG** for hosting this event.

#### Chair:

Mark Lomas, Head of Equality, Diversity & Inclusion, HS2

#### Contributors:

Dr Meryl Bushell, Non-Executive Director; Executive Coach; Crown Representative, Cabinet Office

Lisa Kelvey, Associate Director, KPMG LLP

Dr Alison Parken, Senior Research Fellow, Cardiff University

Keela Shackell-Smith, Co-lead of the Cross Government Women's Network, Environment Agency

Siân Thomas, Head of Asset Management, Tideway

#### Debate Chair:

Kru Desai, Partner & Head of Government and Infrastructure Practice, KPMG LLP

#### Panellists:

Chris Davidson, Managing Director, Active Presence Limited

Tom Pearce, Talent and Workforce Data – Project Delivery Profession, Infrastructure and Projects Authority

Prof Linda Scott, Emeritus DP World Chair for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, Saïd Business School

#### Participating Organisations:

Active Presence Limited

Amey

Arcadis LLP

Arup

Atkins plc

BAM Nuttall Ltd

BP Exploration Operating Company Ltd

Balfour Beatty plc

Bechtel Ltd

Broadway Innovation

Cabinet Office

Cardiff University

Carillion plc

CH2M

Costain Ltd

EDF Energy

Environment Agency

Fluor Ltd

Heathrow Airport Ltd

Home Office

HS2

Infrastructure and Projects Authority

Jacobs Group

KPMG LLP

Laing O'Rourke

Mace Group Ltd

Major Projects Association

Ministry of Justice

Mott MacDonald

PA Consulting

PwC

Saïd Business School

Scottish Power

Skanska

Thales Group

Tideway

Transport for London

Turner & Townsend

WYG

For further information contact: Manon Bradley, Development Director, Major Projects Association  
t: 01865 338070 [mpa@majorprojects.org](mailto:mpa@majorprojects.org) [www.majorprojects.org](http://www.majorprojects.org)