

EMBRACING DIVERSITY - MANAGING PEOPLE WHO DON'T LOOK LIKE YOU



Highlights from the Major Projects Association event held on **15th May 2019**

The SAS: Who Dares Wins military selection reality TV show has just allowed women to take part. But by Episode 3 the male recruiter has already accepted withdrawal from half of the women. He listens to their tearful stories with sympathy but very little empathy. In contrast, the struggling men are told they are doing a good job. Several times the recruiter reflects how the male recruits are 'just like me at his age'.

This is an example of appointing in your own image. We do it because it is easier to understand those who are just like us.

Whilst most people in positions of power are white men this pattern of appointing is perpetuated. In order to achieve real diversity in major projects we must face this reality and learn how to overcome it.

This seminar aimed to unpick some of the barriers to achieving diversity and to learn from those who are leading diverse teams. The following themes emerged:

1. The power of personal stories to inspire others and transform attitudes.
2. The need for company cultures to create a safe space for honesty and authenticity.
3. Leaders must lead by example, understand their own biases and engage at all levels to advocate real change.
4. We must place a greater importance on mirroring the society we seek to serve. This is good for individuals, society and for business.

THE POWER OF PERSONAL STORIES

From the early comments of the chair through to the final reflections of the panel, this seminar was delivered through a series of personal stories: a narrative of personal and professional journeys and how they have been influenced by bias and prejudice.

It was evident that the power of these stories was transformative in inspiring others to speak up and call out bias in the workplace.

Each speaker was a powerful role model, but the most emphatic immediate effect was that the black women in the audience felt empowered to share experiences – identifying an even larger cohort of role models.

In its own way the Major Projects Association had created a safe place for discourse and debate.

CREATING SAFE COMPANY CULTURES

Throughout the narrative of our speakers' personal stories, the need to be able to understand another's perspective fully, and empathise with their experiences, was viewed as a fundamental step in creating an inclusive and diverse business.

Habee Folami shared her shocking experiences as a young, black, female professional, regularly labelled angry and aggressive due to her passionate approach. In a study carried out in 2018, adult black faces were four times more likely to be incorrectly labelled as angry faces than adult white faces. Within the study 17-year-olds already had the tendency to wrongly label black faces as angry, and they will carry this bias into the workplace. Habee's advice:

- Recognise your own individual biases.
- Set the tone from the top of your organisation (including gathering data).
- Push for a safe space within your organisation to discuss race and broader diversity openly.

'A safe space to discuss also gives a safe space from which to take action.'

Habee Folami, Senior Leader, Marketing, Unaffiliated

Mike Haigh from Mott MacDonald highlighted the importance of networks as a proactive way that female, black or LGBT employees can be given a voice and a safe space in which to share experiences. However, they must also encourage others to feel able to ask questions that can help work colleagues see the world through your eyes

Lisa Hogben of the Nichols Group cited her experiences of making assumptions about people's backgrounds after her own findings that one of her seemingly British, white, male colleagues had an even more exotic, international heritage than her own, and had less cultural affinity with the UK than she did. Her example illustrated how we must challenge and understand our own bias and prejudice by asking questions and breaking down assumptions.

'One of the things I'm most proud of is the fact that we have embraced the need for a more inclusive workplace and hope we can help others get to the same point.'

Mike Haigh, Group Managing Director, Mott MacDonald

Mike summarised the Mott MacDonald approach as follows:

- Embrace the need for change.
- Understand the business case as well as the societal need.
- Understand your own unconscious bias.
- Appoint an experienced equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) specialist or work with relevant charities and consultants.
- Lead from the top and engage at all levels.
- Embed within the business.

AECOM also have a proactive programme to create an inclusive, diverse and productive workforce. Their approach focuses on the need for flexibility to recruit and retain a diverse workforce. Karen Britton from AECOM shared her experiences as a returner to work after a six-year career break on a personally tailored programme designed to help her achieve her full potential in a way that worked for her.

AECOM's **Freedom to Grow** philosophy is based on the simple assumption that if it works for you, your team and the client, then it works for AECOM. The 'Client, Team, You? Us!' message means that employees have the permission to shape their work-life balance and the ability to 'call it out' if they encounter barriers to doing so. Karen's advice, as a manager, is to trust your team on 'how' to deliver.

'A well-motivated team will deliver – but not necessarily in the way you originally thought!'

Karen Britton, Technical Director, AECOM

Companies are also starting to recognise the importance of neurodiversity. Neurodiversity describes people who have conditions that mean they think differently from how society expects, and includes conditions such as ADHD, autism or dyslexia. Approximately 1 in 6 people in the UK are neurodivergent. Julian Foster of Affinity

Water shared his experiences when he worked with 'David'. Showing interest in the challenges David faced enabled Julian to really understand his strengths and led to a breakthrough solution to a complex problem in the business.

'Neurodiversity is a phenomenon whose time has come. As companies are increasingly required to adapt at speed, innovative thinking becomes an indispensable asset. And many neurodiverse people are at the forefront of innovative thinking.'

Nancy Doyle, CEO, Genius Within, as quoted by Julian Foster, Community Delivery Director, Affinity Water

REFLECTING THE SOCIETY WE SERVE

In the final panel session of the day, the chair asked both panel and audience what they would do differently. This led to a discussion on how the sector can speed up progress towards a more diverse workforce.

- Numerous contributors quoted the parallel with safety culture and the investment which had gone into that in order to effect change. EDI needed the same focus, many felt.
- Participants acknowledged that there was a burning platform for the sector, as they were falling behind other industries in capturing diverse talent. The sector must make radical change if it is not to fall further behind.
- Our panellists all commented that they wished they had been more vocal on the subject earlier and had been more proactive as role models.

POINTS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- How can the Major Projects Association help to promote role models within the sector and continue to provide a safe place to share experience and good practice?
- How can the Major Projects Association give a higher profile to the concept of social value to drive change?

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Chair:

Dale Evans, Chair, Infrastructure Client Group

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Participating Organisations:

AECOM
AWE
Affinity Water
Anglian Water
BAM Nuttall Ltd
Balfour Beatty plc
CJ Associates
Cavendish Nuclear
Department of Health & Social Care
Disability Rights UK
Fluor Ltd
Government Equalities Office
HS2

IPA Global
Jacobs Group
Logikal Projects
Major Projects Association
Ministry of Defence
Mott MacDonald
Network Rail Ltd
Nuclear Decommissioning Authority
Parliamentary Strategic Estates
Pinsent Masons LLP
Raytheon Systems Limited
Rolls-Royce plc
School of Construction and Project Management, UCL

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Julian Foster, Community Delivery Director, Affinity Water
Mike Haigh, Group Managing Director, Mott MacDonald
Lisa Hogben, Consultant, The Nichols Group
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