

EMBRACING DIVERSITY - TEN KEY QUESTIONS TO CHALLENGE YOUR ORGANISATION

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

In 2019 the SAS: *Who Dares Wins* military selection reality TV show allowed women to take part for the first time. Star of the show, Director of Staff Ant Middleton, claimed many times that he would not discriminate between the men and the women on the course. But by Episode 3 he had already accepted voluntary withdrawal from half of the women. He listened to their tearful stories with sympathy but very little empathy. In contrast, the struggling men were told they were doing a good job or taken to one side and told to 'let it all out'. Several times Ant reflects how the male recruits were 'just like me at his age'.

This is not overt discrimination or unconscious bias. This is an example of appointing in your own image. We do it all the time, because it is easy to understand and manage those who are just like us. And whilst the majority of people in positions of power are white men this pattern of appointing and promoting in their own image is perpetuated. In order to achieve real diversity in our major projects we have to face this reality and learn how to overcome it.

This Major Projects Association seminar aimed to understand some of the barriers to achieving diversity and to learn from those who are leading truly diverse teams. Throughout the course of the day the following themes emerged:

1. The power of personal stories to inspire others and transform attitudes.
2. The need to create company cultures that provide a safe space for honesty and authenticity, and the freedom to ask challenging questions that will help us work together as a diverse team.
3. The need for leaders to understand their own biases and engage at all levels to advocate real change.
4. The importance of mirroring the society we seek to serve. This is good for individuals, society and for business as it stimulates performance and innovation.

So how can we, as individuals, make this happen? Here are Ten Key Questions to ask yourself, your colleagues and those who lead your business, to keep driving for progress on this critical issue.

'I couldn't believe it! Despite having a family with diverse background, an unconscious bias test showed that I still had bias against BAME individuals.'
Mike Haigh, Group Managing Director, Mott MacDonald

1. WHY DO I THINK THAT?

Everyone has the potential to be biased. It is part of our survival strategy that our brain makes rapid decisions about people based on our upbringing, environment, stereotypes and previous experiences.

Becoming more aware of how our biases influence our thinking is one way to make our decisions less predetermined, and instead to be influenced by more relevant facts.

Self-awareness is key to understanding our own biases and how we can overcome them.

Slowing ourselves down to avoid gut decisions and challenging ourselves and others with, 'Why do I/we think that?' can help create a better decision-making environment.

The most readily available way to explore your own bias is via the Harvard Implicit Association tests. Tests which explore our response to gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, disability and obesity are amongst those that **are available**.

2. HOW DIVERSE IS YOUR NETWORK?

'Every white man knows a white woman but rarely has a BAME woman in their professional or personal network.'

– Frank Douglas, only black HR Director of FTSE 100 company, as quoted by Lisa Hogben, Consultant, The Nichols Group

Understanding a diverse range of ideas and perspectives is a powerful way to become more self-aware and more inclusive.

However, we can only do that if we have people in our network who we can learn from and discuss things with. How diverse is your family and friendship group? In your professional life do you take the opportunity to get to know those who are from a different background or culture? In particular, do you notice when people who are different are being excluded or ignored and take action to include them?

One way to improve your own approach and to challenge your colleagues to think about it too is to use the **WISE Inclusivity Profile** as a way to encourage good behaviours.

The Major Projects Association Gender Balance Initiative was launched in 2015. Throughout the next 12 months we held a series of events. Marny Moruzzi, then at HS2, now at Mott MacDonald, wrote a blog about those first events. Here she reflects on the 2019 seminar and how things have changed in the past four years.

REFLECTIONS FROM MARNY MORUZZI

“For me, Mike Haigh set a great tone by saying we need to turn ‘awareness into behaviour’. The Major Projects Association Gender Balance Initiative was launched four years ago in the very same room. Since then we have seen tidal waves in awareness of gender balance; to name two, the introduction of annual gender pay reporting, and the emergence of returner programmes as the skills shortage begins to bite. The key change now has to be our behaviour, and that means diversifying our workforce and stepping away from mirror imaging to recruit and retain. It also means acknowledging our, often natural, biases. Unconscious bias training was mentioned a lot, so I was pleased to hear Mike say ‘It’s not something you train people out of.’ We can influence each other to improve our culture and challenge the status quo.

The stark reminder of how important it is to challenge and not be part of the problem was brought to us by Habee Folami, who was brave enough to present her own personal experience as a driven and efficient woman. Her tenacity and skill were perceived by her peers as an ‘angry black woman’. I could certainly identify with some of her experiences, and around the room a lot of attendees were nodding in agreement. Her continued commitment proves the resilience that is often needed for major projects. It comes down to actively influencing cultural change, busting myths and not casting assumptions and biases – as Lisa Hogben also energetically reminded us.

Neurodiversity was a very welcome topic to me too, opening our eyes to a resource pool often frozen out because they do not meet supposed societal norms. I was glad to see that autism is becoming better understood and unique workplace skills are being identified for use.

Contrasting barriers to entry with barriers to return, there was the most inspirational returner experience I have ever heard: Karen Britton impressed us by the way she listed on her CV that her time spent at home nurturing her children had developed her crisis management skills! She has returned successfully to pick back up her award-winning career and continue her fantastic contribution to our industry. Noting that the typical 9 to 5 hours and working location can be a challenge which is recognised, and hearing of tasks being tailored to strengths, was inspiring.

Returning in the way Karen did is unfortunately rare. I know brilliant women who could change the world, if only they could get back into meaningful work to do so.

I also think of those who haven’t had extended leave for parenting, those juggling family life with presenteeism, and those that are still ‘fighting the fight’, struggling to pay for childcare and committed to both our industry and their families. I look forward to hearing more success from AECOM’s ‘Freedom To Grow’ toolkit in which this huge employer is ensuring all employees will be given the opportunity to express what work means to them and how work works for them.

The perception that ‘we can’t offer everyone flexibility’ needs to be broken down; we need to offer flexibility fairly. We are a ‘sandwich’ generation and a multi-generation workforce. To me positive change in gender balance has to benefit everyone at all stages in life and of all lifestyles, not just new entrants, parents and other segments. For me the challenge is raising two sons whilst not yet at the midpoint of my career. Others are looking after older relatives and/or have continued caring commitments. This doesn’t impact on our abilities to contribute significantly to major projects – we just need the flexibility to do so.

After lunch the Major Projects Association Choir was born! OK, not exactly, but there was a fantastic display of what can happen when every voice is heard. Initially there was nervous laughter as we were warmed into the repertoire. Turning three songs into a fantastic choral piece served to remind us that we should all be heard, that we are stronger together and that we have a voice to use.

When I wrote for the Major Projects Association previously, I was a mum with a young baby; I’m now a mum with a toddler and my first baby is at school. I’m a positive role model to them – hero actually – because I told my eldest I once met the former astronaut Sandra Magnus at a conference, and he loves space! I am a stronger, more confident, skilled and capable professional (including crisis management of all kinds) as a result of getting involved. Empowerment is key and we need everyone to take up the opportunity to build trust, loyalty and therefore a future-proofed culture to build successful major projects.

I advocate being the change you want to see and I encourage everyone to get involved and to have your voice heard. The major projects world needs to be more attractive and needs to retain a high-quality workforce. The awareness and appetite for positive change is there, let’s use it!”

SAY THAT AGAIN!

Getting someone's name right is the very least than we can expect as individuals in a professional environment and yet those from different cultures and backgrounds often have to tolerate mispronunciation, misspelling and forgetfulness when it comes to their names. For decades Chinese students were told to adopt an English name if coming to study or work in the UK because we could not handle their real names! Our name and our identity are fundamentally connected. Being inclusive means we need to concentrate on learning and using different names from different cultures when we make new contacts.

'Making the effort to get someone's name right is the simplest form of respect we can offer.'

Mara Tafadzwa Makoni, Senior Consultant, WSP

3. HAVE YOU CREATED A SAFE SPACE FOR DISCUSSIONS ON GENDER, RACE AND SEXUALITY?

The need to understand another's perspective and empathise with their experiences was viewed as a fundamental step in creating an inclusive and diverse business. However, it is not always easy for people to strike up conversations with those who they view as different from themselves. That is why it is important to provide a variety of forums that allow people to come together and ask the types of questions that will create stronger bonds and greater understanding between different groups in our organisations.

'Networks are a proactive way that female, black or LGBT employees can be given a voice and provide a safe space to share experiences. However, they must also encourage others to feel able to ask questions – sometimes difficult questions – that can help allies and work colleagues see the world through your eyes.'

Mike Haigh, Group Managing Director, Mott MacDonald

In a racialised emotion recognition study carried out in 2018, adult black faces were four times more likely to be incorrectly labelled as angry faces than adult white faces. The study showed that the 17-year-olds already had the tendency to wrongly label black faces as angry and they will carry this bias into the workplace. This illustrates that employers need to work hard to ensure these types of assumption do not undermine the quest for an inclusive workplace.

'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

We must challenge and understand our own bias and prejudice by asking questions and breaking down assumptions. It can be hard to ask the type of questions that mean we can really understand another's viewpoint. You might feel you need to know someone quite well before you can ask, 'Do I call you black?' Providing supportive environments for these conversations is key to an inclusive workplace. There are a great many resources that give guidance on being a good ally, for example, *Guide to being an effective BAME ally*. Another useful resource can be found [here](#).

4. WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO HELP OVERCOME UNCONSCIOUS BIAS IN YOUR ORGANISATION?

So, we acknowledge that we are all biased. But how can we make certain that everyone in the business understands how to ensure that these biases do not negatively impact upon others?

Leaders should be seeking to encourage everyone to understand unconscious bias through awareness training and discussion on how to mitigate the common types of bias. There is a great deal of debate about the effectiveness of unconscious bias training. Formal training courses can provide a good starting point but need to be followed through to ensure that the learning is embedded within the behaviours encouraged by the business.

'While unconscious bias training can raise awareness, there is little evidence it changes behaviour, and some showing it can backfire.'

Pilita Clark, Financial Times

Organisations also need to go further than that by reviewing processes and procedures – particularly in recruitment and appraisal – to design out the opportunity for bias to occur and to prompt and remind employees of good practice which might mitigate bias and lead to more diverse and inclusive organisations. Put *What Works – Gender Equality by Design* by Iris Bohnet on your reading list.

The Major Projects Association report *Unconscious bias – how to understand and challenge it* is another useful resource. It provides insight into unconscious bias, how it affects business and how it can be challenged

Another useful resource can be found [here](#).

5. DO YOU BELIEVE THIS BUSINESS IS A TRUE MERITOCRACY?

All leaders like to believe that their organisation or team operates as a meritocracy, but research shows the more emphatic a leader is that their organisation is a meritocracy the less likely it is to be true. This belief in an underlying merit-based culture, that always selects the best person for the job irrespective of gender/ethnicity/age, is merely a denial of human nature and

our overwhelming affinity bias, which means we fundamentally recruit in our own image. Those leaders that recognise this and put in place strategies to minimise bias are those most likely to achieve something approaching a meritocracy at some time in the future.

'We don't have a meritocracy. Don't be the person who says we do!'
Lisa Hogben, Consultant, The Nichols Group

You can read more at Harvard Kennedy School's [Gender Action Portal](#) and in [this article](#) from *First Round Review*.

6. ARE YOU COLLECTING DATA ON ETHNIC DIVERSITY AS WELL AS GENDER BALANCE WITHIN THE BUSINESS?

We generally subscribe to the idea that 'what gets measured gets done' but how much diversity-related data do you collect in your business? We are now familiar with the recent legislation to declare the gender pay gap but what about the ethnicity pay gap? In the 2017 [Colour of Power research project](#) it was found that Britain's most powerful elite is 97% white. What is the equivalent figure for your company?

Creating a diversity dashboard is a powerful way to show transparency and visualise your progress. A number of companies have [open source versions](#) that you can adapt.

7. DO YOU HAVE PERFORMANCE RELATED TARGETS AROUND D&I?

If you are collecting diversity data is it reflected in the targets for your executive team or line managers? All too often diversity and inclusion (D&I) targets can be pushed aside or considered less important than other targets related to productivity or profitability. This does not send the right message to your senior team and those who can most influence the culture and make-up of the organisation. Improved diversity within the business will ultimately drive improved productivity and profitability if it is fully embraced.

The business case for D&I is now well researched and documented. A study of 1,000 companies in 12 countries by McKinsey & Company found that organisations in the top 25% for gender diversity among executive leadership were likely to outperform on profitability (by 21%) and value creation (by 27%). The positive impact of diversity in decision-making is not just limited to the impact of women in teams.

McKinsey's ongoing work in this area demonstrates consistently that greater ethnic and cultural diversity is linked to a 33%–35% likelihood of outperformance on earnings before interest and tax (EBIT) margin.

You can find a comprehensive listing of the research findings linked to the impact of diversity and inclusion on business performance [here](#).

'If you do not feel valued and able to speak up – you will not bring value to the business.'
Habee Folami, Senior Leader

8. FLEXIBLE WORKING – DO YOU STILL ASK 'WHY?' INSTEAD OF 'WHY NOT?'

Businesses that have genuinely accepted that flexible and agile working is key to its success in attracting and retaining a diverse and suitably skilled workforce for the future have generally moved from asking 'why?' to 'why not?' when faced with a request for a flexible or customised working arrangement.

One company with a proactive programme to create an inclusive, diverse and productive workforce is AECOM. Their approach focuses on the need for flexibility to recruit and retain a diverse workforce. The AECOM **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.

'As a manager, 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

QUESTIONS ABOUT FLEXIBLE WORKING THAT LEADERS SHOULD ASK THEIR STAFF MORE OFTEN:

- How can we make this work for you?
- Do you feel you can be yourself at work?
- What makes you think that?

9. ARE WE REFLECTING THE SOCIETY WE SERVE?

Increasingly, companies in the major projects sector are starting to recognise that they must place greater emphasis on social inclusion to ensure that infrastructure, digital and other major programmes meet more fully the needs of society and the communities within it. Indeed, the [Infrastructure Client Group](#) has recently made this a priority.

This will help drive the make-up of companies and communities involved in infrastructure projects. At the time of publication, the Government was just completing a consultation on ['Social value in government procurement'](#) and how to evaluate its contribution.

'How are we, as an industry, reflecting the society we seek to serve?'

Sam Daly, Inclusion and Diversity Lead, Jacobs

To achieve a more socially inclusive approach the major projects sector must work towards a better gender-balanced workforce and encourage wide-ranging consultation that can genuinely ensure that 51% of the population are given a voice both in design and outcome. Cultural, ethnic, religious and disability-related perspectives must also be captured through more diverse company teams, partners and supply chains.

To encourage diverse applicants to our companies and participation in consultation we must have visible role models that represent all sectors of the community; we must look in different places for our talent and be creative in how we engage with them.

As well as visible diversity, companies are also starting to recognise the importance of neurodiversity in their employees. 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 and they can bring incredible insight into our project teams. An appreciation of the importance of this group of individuals and their societal needs in relation to design of schools, hospitals and other community infrastructure is only just emerging.

'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

10. WHAT WOULD RADICAL CHANGE LOOK LIKE TO ACCELERATE PROGRESS?

It is acknowledged that the major projects sector has a burning platform, as it is falling behind other industries in capturing diverse talent. Hence we must be brave and make radical changes if we are not to fall further behind. This could include recapturing highly skilled returners to work in the sector or accelerating the development of younger candidates within organisations. The Major Projects Association can act as a catalyst to promote that within the sector and continue to provide a safe place to share experience and good practice.

'Leaders don't all have to be "old". In other sectors leaders are often much younger and have fewer years' experience.'

Lisa Hogben, Consultant, The Nichols Group

The parallel between the shift to a more safety-driven culture is often cited as the way that we need to approach creating an inclusive culture. This would require substantial investment of time and money, as was the case with safety culture, to drive a sector-wide change in mindset.

Some companies are now using D&I moments at the beginning of meetings and ensuring D&I is on all executive team agendas, so that it remains a high-profile component of all company business in the same way as we articulate safety.

'This is core to the future of our industry!'

Dale Evans, Chair, Infrastructure Client Group

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