

# HOW TO ACHIEVE BETTER GENDER BALANCE IN MAJOR PROJECTS



Highlights from the Major Projects Association event held on 5th November 2015

The pipeline of major infrastructure projects which the UK Government wishes to deliver in the next decade requires 100,000 new entrants into this business. The global demand for experienced project delivery people is in the tens of millions between now and 2020. If we only recruit from our traditional sources we will fail to deliver these projects. We must try harder to recruit and retain female talent. Even without the skills shortages we should be trying harder to engage women in our companies.

All of the evidence from [KPMG](#), [McKinsey & Co](#), [Grant Thornton](#), to name but a few, says that increasing the number of women on Boards and executive teams leads to greater creativity, improved problem-solving, better decision-making and a better bottom line.

'Our industry is appalling compared to other sectors. We simply are not attracting the best people.'  
[Simon Kirby, CEO, HS2](#)

The proportion of women in major projects has remained fairly constant in the past decade. Whilst companies might well be recruiting significant numbers of women at apprentice and graduate level they are not staying in great numbers; they are not getting involved in major projects; and are not achieving leadership positions.

## MAJOR PROJECTS ASSOCIATION GENDER BALANCE INITIATIVE

The Major Projects Association has recognised that companies are struggling to recruit, retain and promote women in significant numbers. This event was held to begin exploring the issues and to identify and share best practice. It was also the springboard for the launch of the [Association's Gender Balance Initiative](#) which aims to provide support to tackle this issue through:

- Endorsement of the WISE Ten Steps campaign for greater gender balance.
- Sharing best practice at events held throughout 2016 on WISE Ten Steps themes such as Leadership, Recruitment, Retention and Promotion.
- The establishment of a new area of the [Association's website](#) which includes: signposting to networking groups; inspirational role models; discussion and awareness-raising via online blogs.
- Support for a significant piece of research on the topic of Women in Major Project Leadership being undertaken by Ashridge Business School.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP

Anna Stewart, CEO, Laing O'Rourke and Simon Kirby, CEO, HS2 spoke about their experiences as leaders. Both agreed that progress had been made in the past 30 years – women are no longer expected to use toilets in the local 'Wimpy' whilst out on site. And some organisations have good proportions of female staff – currently 46% of the team on HS2 are women, although Simon Kirby acknowledged that once the project transitions from planning to construction this will be much more difficult to maintain.

However, both agreed that infrastructure, construction and major projects 'do not do gender balance well'. Whilst attitudes have improved in the last 30 years the image of the industry has not. It is still seen as a giant Meccano set – a boy's toy! It is still an industry where presenteeism and inputs are measured, as opposed to outputs. This means that those who cannot fit into the long hours' culture are less likely to succeed.

They also agreed that better gender balance is better for business and that achieving it requires effort on multiple fronts. There is no single fix-all, rather a series of activities which all need to be undertaken and maintained with appropriate support from leaders.

## THE WISE TEN STEPS

Suzy Firkin of WISE outlined the [Ten Steps](#), which provide a common language and framework to enable clear communication internally and throughout the supply chain about culture, behaviours and expectations.



## CASE STUDY – BECHTEL

Sarah Golding from Bechtel explained why they had signed up to the Ten Steps and how they had incorporated them into their operations.

‘We want to be the company whose diversity and inclusion stats are a contributing factor to why we win work.’

Sarah Golding, Lead Project Controls Planner, Bechtel

She pointed out that Bechtel needs to attract, retain, develop and promote more women – it is a whole cycle of development. They took the ideas of the Ten Steps and turned them into a project plan which was relevant for Bechtel, with clear lines of operation and champions for each line. In addition, they asked people what else they wanted and in response, more diversity and inclusion (D&I) awareness work, more networking events and more confidence-building workshops for women were added to the plan. Critically, Bechtel approached this as a business project, not ‘just’ an HR project – it is considered a central part of all business decisions and activities rather than as a D&I add-on.

‘Merit will only get you so far – after that it’s who you know and how people perceive you. It’s not a level playing field for men and women.’

Heather McPherson, Crossrail Handover Manager, Bechtel

## MEN AND WOMEN – EQUAL OR DIFFERENT?

Women spoke of desperately wanting to be treated equally, the same as their male colleagues, and to be judged on their performance alone – until they realised that this had never happened. That bias, discrimination, glass ceilings and walls were barriers to fairness and equality.

[more](#)  [Major Projects Association Gender Balance Initiative](#)

## IT’S NOT WHAT YOU KNOW – IT’S WHO YOU KNOW

Factors contributing towards promotion:

- Exposure 60%
  - Image 30%
  - Performance 10%
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- Only 4% of male CEOs apply for their job
  - 70% of female CEOs apply for their job

(Lynn Tomkins, Chair, Skills4UK)

Simon Kirby suggested that this event would not have taken place five years ago. He is right. It is not a topic that would have been encouraged. Leaders would not have considered it important enough and women would not have wanted to speak up for fear of being labelled troublemakers. Sometimes a particular issue has its moment – for Gender Balance in Major Projects, let’s hope that time is now.

## POINTS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

- Should Government impose quotas regarding female Board members?
- Traditional routes into major projects tend to be via engineering and technical routes – which tend not to attract women in great numbers. How can we redefine this route in order to recruit more women?
- If two candidates, one male, one female, both show similar levels of skill and experience and competence, should you favour the female over the male?
- What behaviours, actions or language do we see nowadays which in ten years’ time will be considered unacceptable?

### Event chairs:

Anna Stewart, Chief Executive, Laing O’Rourke  
Simon Kirby, Chief Executive, HS2

### Contributors:

Manon Bradley, Development Director, Major Projects Association  
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Mark Hansford, Editor, New Civil Engineer  
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Lynn Tomkins, Chair, Skills4UK  
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### Participating organisations:

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