

Improving opportunities for women in the construction industry

BAXI

Report on the roundtable discussion hosted by Baxi, October 19 2023



Baxi is a founding member of the Construction Inclusion Coalition (CIC), which launched in September 2023 with an objective to drive action to correct gender imbalance and address other EDI considerations in the construction sector. One month on, Baxi's roundtable continued on that theme, focusing on gender imbalance and asking:

How can the sector and supply chain improve its attractiveness to women, and what can be done to improve retention rates and reduce women leavers?

As one participant said early on: "How do you tackle the problem all the way through, from the cradle to the grave – what are the things we need to do?"

Like many sectors across STEM and engineering disciplines, construction has a skills gap and the sector's growth and ambition in the future - and the value it delivers to our society - is at risk if it can't attract the necessary talent. Recent CIC research has found that only 15% of construction sector workers are women, and just 6% are from ethnic minority backgrounds. Yet a CIC poll of over 2000 UK adults in July 2023 found that 46% of people said they would be more likely to look for roles in construction if the sector demonstrated a strong commitment to diversity and inclusion. Without becoming more attractive to the full breadth of diversity in the workforce, construction is significantly limiting its access to the talent pool.

The main topics and areas of discussion covered during the roundtable are summarized below.

Collaboration and focus:

The initial response from the group to the question above was twofold: collaborate and learn from others, and focus on tangible, clear action rather than do too much. Collaboration to "learn and apply ideas from others" and to "get an insight into others issues and how they're addressed", but also to recognise achievements in other sectors such as auto or rail. The topic of collaboration also included a discussion on the role of men in making the sector more attractive for women.

The group recognised the scale of the challenge - "the problem risks becoming overwhelming – so much needs to be done" - but shared the desire to find just one or two things to get underway that would help address the sector's male / female imbalance. This was articulated as "on the ground stuff", or "something really tangible", as long as "we can all move forward on it".

These themes of learning from others, finding a practical, achievable and focused action "or couple of things", and the role of men, were revisited throughout the discussion, with the group recognising "we can't do it alone" and that "we shouldn't try to boil the ocean".

The Investment Management sector is one example of where a shared, multi company initiative can demonstrate the power of getting together as a sector. With a similar EDI challenge, the sector collaborated on the 'Diversity Project' involving many employees from different companies working in focussed workstreams.

The group asked how larger companies can share what they are doing with smaller companies, who might think they don't have the time or resources, to demonstrate how improved EDI / gender balance can impact the bottom line. This mirrors the CIC model - a cascade from large companies that have the resources to support smaller ones to drive systemic change, "what have we got that you need to help you get to where you want to be?" The Diversity Project above, illustrates how smaller, less established companies could benefit from the experiences and resources available to larger more established firms.

Review current initiatives and gaps

The group was conscious that a number of EDI related initiatives were already in play in the construction sector, and across STEM, and agreed the need to understand them with a view to aligning them to try and identify any gaps and avoid duplication of effort: "We're all trying to do the same things but what can be the golden thread?" This review should extend across sectors perceived or understood to be better at attracting the right balance in engineering and maths. The question of why nursing and dentistry is more female dominant was discussed. Aside from the discipline, "what is it about those two careers that make them more attractive to women?"

A discussion on pre-work age groups suggested that higher education may have a role, and some work has already been undertaken by the Scottish Funding Council on gender imbalance in education, specifically addressing gender imbalance in some STEM related courses and suggesting that no subject should have a gender imbalance of more than 75:25 by 2030.

Another suggestion that may contribute to retention levels for women in construction is the lack of industry presence in and around GCSE / A-levels: "Work place reality isn't what school / college prepares them for." While construction sector HR and marketing roles are viewed to be well represented by women, the question was asked why all roles in construction don't have the same balance; "It does need to be boots on the ground – at the coal face not just back office. How can we influence them at school?"

Language and visual communication

One clear opportunity for change relates to the vocabulary and visual communication used by the construction sector. The group agreed that the role of language acts as a building block for lots of other things and is a foundation that sets the path. Examples were shared to illustrate how masculine the words and images used around construction work-places are, which can perpetuate the idea that construction is not for women. These included signage for a "one-man lift" and the use of clearly masculine faces in PPE signage, "the male jaw-line". Problematic language examples given included "six man-hours" and "two-man job".

The consensus was that construction work places should replace masculine imagery and vocabulary to make them gender neutral. Standard office software used across office spaces can be programmed to suggest alternative words to replace male terms. Chat bots and other AI driven tools can amalgamate and help people address and change the branding and language of the sector.

It is well researched and agreed that gender re-coded language does not impact on attractiveness to men. Gender neutral language “will attract more women, widen the talent pool, create advantage and improve business performance”. Gender neutral language in the workplace also helps to prevent alienation of women already in role so potentially supportive of retention strategies too.

The debate extended to other accepted terms, words and phrases and asked if these were fuelling women’s disengagement or the wrong perceptions. “There’s something very specific around language – the way we speak and language we use – changing it will start to break down some of those barriers.” For example, is ‘apprenticeship’ the right word, given the diversity of age and backgrounds that candidates have? Does it put people off, and could we change its name to make it more attractive? “Even the term ‘STEM’ feels like a barrier!”. The names of roles and job titles were also discussed, with reference to the automotive sector and its adoption of sector wide job families, used to amplify through consistency the opportunity in the role.

Communicating with relevance

Building on comments relating to the term ‘apprenticeships’, the discussion focussed on how to define and communicate the right motives to match individual’s interests, based on their backgrounds. For example, it was noted that the perception is that apprenticeships are only for school leavers / young people, and that apprentice wages aren’t attractive for returners.

The Tech sector was given as an example of a sector that uses different language to get people attracted to roles. Tech companies communicate opportunities with terms like tech boot-camps, career change, and Do it Later branded campaigns, designed to be attractive to workers / career returners.

In particular, research shows that women respond differently to communications, language and advertising. By not recognising and adapting recruitment communication to put women at the centre, there is a risk that women might think “they are just making the numbers up” to meet gender quotas. The example was given of how there are only four known women roofers in the industry. The target audience/individual needs to believe that the opportunity is relevant to them, “for people who look like me, are my age and colour”.

Designing roles around women

Not only does language and communication need to be relevant to women, but jobs need to be too. Jobs should be designed with women in mind, with consideration given to hours per week, flexible working, job sharing, etc. The question was asked if 40-hour weeks are realistic for the majority of women, who may need to factor in childcare or other commitments. Managers might need to consider two part-time roles rather than one full time, but would that have implications for career progression? Managers might make the assumption that part time employees don’t want progression.

The opportunity is for managers to look at the whole career experience to ensure women are attracted to roles, but as someone pointed out, “role design has been so white male dominated for so many years that all the problems have yet to surface”. It’s not thought to be possible to pre-empt all the challenges for women until they have been in the role. “You get them in to business but then they leave – for reasons that we didn’t consider”.

Allyship and other tools

One strategic tool that was discussed that could help bring clarity to the experience of women in the construction workplace was allyship relationships. Where allyship has been successfully applied, business “have seen a serious change in leadership – they get it now! [Leaders] understand how it feels to be in this industry in someone else’s shoes.”

Allyship involves a leader committing to being an active ally to another colleague - partnering up with an individual to fully understand and appreciate the workplace from their point of view – “to understand work from their perspective, so they feel it.” This is essential to being able to create cultural inclusion, achievable role modelling (allyship), fostering understanding with conviction, the development of talent and skills, and supportive formal mechanisms.

While used broadly to understand the many different facets of an employee’s experience, allyship can be focussed just on gender. Its use ensures the “others” views and experiences are factored into decision making, as the leader now empathises and can think differently. “It’s like an undercover boss...who can understand some of the problems – become less disconnected from the workforce.”

In addressing workforce gender imbalance, effective allyship can help fuel a new vocabulary and inspire creative input to improve attraction and connection, driving the communications to make it relevant and authentic.

HS2 is one organisation that’s regarded as doing allyship well. It’s talked about at board level and is embedded in the culture at senior level. An outcome for HS2 has led to recruitment teams offering pre-interview workshops to build confidence among different groups.

HS2 and others have also had successes using the Clear Assured Framework (Global Inclusion Standard), as it drives progress in EDI through tangible actions. But Clear Assured can carry significant cost and the framework can be intimidating to manage, adopt and apply. It’s value is that it takes attitudes towards EDI from be a tick box response to something that’s now properly embedded in the organisation.

Promoting purpose and social value

The group reflected on people’s expectations from work and work/life balance in the post covid era, and how people want to grow their careers. The construction sector and what it does has an impact on society and on people’s lives, and there is evidence of a different response when we articulate that social value in our roles; “come and work for us and make a difference!”. How powerful would it be if the sector projected it’s social impact more effectively, speaking not just to the project but to the purpose? This could be a more appealing way to engage younger and older audiences and returners.

An attraction strategy could be to set out how a role will make an impact, rather than describe just the function of the role. “Think of the impact you could make if you worked in construction!”

A possible route forward.

A desired outcome of the roundtable discussion was to agree on a specific action / actions that companies across the sector could act on. The conversation covered several important and compelling areas where it would be relatively easy to start transforming the sector, but mapped together they present a more strategic but tangible thread:

Allyship. Identify leaders to partner with women workers in traditionally male dominant areas of the business (i.e. not HR or marketing), to understand and live their experience of the work place. Be conscious of the breadth of different life experiences across different individuals (i.e. childcare, age, experience). Embed the allyship experience into leadership decision making and board level discussions. Ally to employee resource groups that orgs aren't familiar with to get a range of views and experiences rather than an individual's. But Allyship shouldn't exist in isolation, rather it's one tool that can help embed awareness into organisational decision making and culture.

Communication: Take the insights and experience learnt through process like allyship to change visual, written and spoken communication, so that it better relates to women and their expectations. Use allyship to re-define and describe roles so they become relevant and attractive to women (i.e. embedded in purpose) and women returners, and help retain women already in the sector through applying authenticity and relevance. Use software / AI tools such as Microsoft office software or similar to identify problematic language and phrases.

Collaboration: Use existing and new shared platforms (i.e. Enginuity Career Converter) to amplify the value of a diverse sector and to embed new attitudes and behaviours that more align with a gender neutral workplace and equal opportunity. Strengthen the construction sector's approach by adopting successful approaches evidenced by companies in other sectors.

Our roundtable took place at RIBA, 66 Portland Place, and was hosted by Karen Boswell OBE, Managing Director of Baxi Heating UK & Ireland. We are extremely grateful for the generosity of all participants who enabled a lively, rich and rewarding discussion, which we have attempted to summarise in this debrief report.

Our sincere thanks to:

Natascha Engel, Co-founder and CEO of Palace Yard

Sam Grierson, Customer Proposition Director & EDI Chair for Wolseley Group

Victoria Jones, Global Vice President of ED&I at AtkinsRéalis

Julianne Miles MBE, CEO and Co-Founder of Women Returners

Jack Painter, co-leader of Products & Services Delivery at WISE

Marsha Ramroop (meeting chair), Founder Director of Unheard Voice Consultancy

Carolyn Reed, HR Director at Baxi Heating UK&Ir

Dr. Susan Scurlock MBE, CEO and Founder of Primary Engineer

Ann Watson, Chief Executive of Enginuity Group

Kerry Wilson, Learning & Development Manager at the Builders Merchants Federation

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