



# CIOB

The Chartered  
Institute of Building

Special  
Report

# Diversity and Inclusion in Construction

A charter for competitive  
advantage and enhanced  
employee belonging

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## About us

We are the Chartered Institute of Building, and we stand for the science, ethics and practice of built environments across the world. Everything we do is to improve the quality of life for those using and creating the built environment.

We have a role in the management, leadership, education and development of our industry, guiding and educating our members as they embark on their careers.

Using both the cutting edge of technology and the foundation of hard-earned experience, we train the construction experts of the future. From tools and data for the day-to-day, to degree qualifications for investing in a career. We train and shape workers and organisations who make our industry what it is.



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# What we build should meet the needs of society

This is hard to achieve if we are not sufficiently diverse and, as an industry, do not reflect society.

# Foreword

The CIOB has, over the years, examined some of the biggest issues in society, suggesting actions that can be taken to address them and offering leadership by making the case for doing so.

We have tackled difficult yet important subjects such as corruption, modern slavery, mental health and social mobility. We, as an industry, have the potential to drive positive change and we can do this by ensuring that we promote equality and support initiatives which break down barriers, reduce the impact of bias and actively support all those who aspire to a fulfilling and progressive career in our industry.

What we build should meet the needs of society. That is hard to achieve if we are not sufficiently diverse and, as an industry, do not reflect society.

It is abundantly clear that improving equality is in everyone's interest, and recognising that our own journey is just starting, we as an organisation will work with our members, our networks, other professional bodies and across the wider industry to promote equality and play our part in enacting positive change.

We won't let this special report and Charter sit on a shelf gathering dust. This has been developed to be practical and useful, with behaviours that we can all work towards to make our industry more inclusive. It doesn't point a finger



but encourages, recognising that we are all at different stages of the journey. No single organisation has this cracked, but every one of us, and every business in this sector can improve.

If one of your ambitions is to make this industry fairer and more open to others, then I encourage you to sign up to our Charter, to help make a difference, and to promote and share the very best of what you are doing. This is not about seeking perfection - it is about striving for something better. Our Charter sets out a direction of travel and now each of us must plot the course towards a more inclusive industry.

**Caroline Gumble, Chief Executive  
The Chartered Institute of Building**

## Introduction:

# Why this matters: survival and success

The business case for increasing diversity and inclusion in the construction industry could not be clearer. The demographic profile of the UK's entire workforce involved in the construction lifecycle, mirrored in other countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, is predominantly white and male, and it is ageing. In the fourth quarter of 2019, just before the pandemic struck, women made up just 12.3% of the country's construction workforce.<sup>1</sup> Recent estimates of the proportion of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME<sup>2</sup>) people in it have varied from around 5%<sup>3</sup> to 7%<sup>4</sup>, dropping to 1% or fewer among senior industry roles.<sup>5</sup>

This workforce is becoming more advanced in age, with some 32.5% comprised of those aged 50 and over<sup>6</sup> and retirement imminent for some 15% of them.<sup>7</sup> The looming exodus of older employees is not matched by a

corresponding influx of younger ones. Only some 10% of those working in construction are aged between 19 and 24, with just 1-2% aged between 16 and 18.<sup>8</sup>

There is evidence of strain in the supply of professional and management talent. A survey completed in January 2019 of 276 companies collectively employing more than 160,000 people indicated that just over 40% were experiencing 'some difficulty' in recruiting construction project managers and related professionals, with around 16% encountering 'severe difficulties'.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, owing to its unusual demographics, the industry looks set to come under further strain as demand for construction recovers from the effects of the pandemic. In its latest five-year outlook, the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) forecast that construction output will grow 4.4%

12.3% Women made up the country's construction workforce in 2019

32.5% comprised of those aged 50 and over and retirement imminent for 15%

5-7% Recent estimates of the proportion of BAME people

10% of those working in construction are aged between 19 and 24

1% of BAME people are among senior industry roles

1-2% are aged just between 16 and 18

each year on average between 2021 and 2025, with demand led by infrastructure and home building, with a growing contribution from retrofits and repairs. That will necessitate the recruitment of an extra 217,000 workers over the period, some 43,000 a year.<sup>10</sup> Among non-



manual occupations, the annual extra requirement breaks down as follows: 400 more construction project managers a year; 800 construction trades supervisors; 1,350 senior, executive and business process managers; 3,600 other construction process managers;

and 7,850 non-construction professional, technical, IT, and other office-based staff.

Given these circumstances, for companies to stay competitive, and to be more attractive to potential employees, it will be imperative for them to recruit talent from those sections of the population that are now severely underrepresented, including the roughly half of it that are female, the approximately 13% that are BAME (note that the proportion of ethnic minorities rises considerably in London and other cities) and the estimated 2.7% who are LGBTQ+.<sup>11</sup> As Willmott Dixon group chief executive Rick Willmott has remarked, speaking of gender diversity, the industry has been “fishing in 50% of the gene pool for too long”.<sup>12</sup>

The numbers suggest that diversity and inclusion in construction is not so much a fashionable cause as it is a matter of individual business survival. A growing body of evidence suggests that it is also a matter of business

success. Management consulting giant McKinsey has been tracking gender and ethnic diversity in companies around the world since 2014, mapping those outcomes against business performance. Taking gender first, in 2014 it found that companies in the top quartile for diversity on executive teams were 15% more likely to have above-average profitability than companies in the fourth quartile. That figure rose to 21% in 2017 and 25% in 2019.<sup>13</sup>

Applying the filter of ethnicity, the figures are starker. In 2014, McKinsey found that companies in the top quartile for ethnic diversity on executive teams were 35% more likely to have above-average profitability than companies in the fourth quartile. The figure was 33% in 2017 and 36% in 2019. “The debate is over,” says Mark Harrison, head of equality, diversity and inclusion transformation at the CIOB. “The business case has been made.”

That is the starting point for this charter: that the issue of diversity and inclusion is one of vital strategic importance for construction business leaders right now, and it sets out the steps they need to take to get their organisations moving in the right direction.

Getting moving in the right direction is the load-bearing idea here, because change cannot happen overnight. Most organisations that now enjoy enviable records on diversity and inclusion started from somewhere very different. It is a journey an organisation must start and involves changing cultures and processes over time within a given organisation’s unique context. This charter is intended to encourage the first step in that journey. The five actions recommended here are not difficult in and of themselves, but making all five work together over time to produce results will take thought and commitment.



# The Diversity and Inclusion Charter

As an organisation, we will:

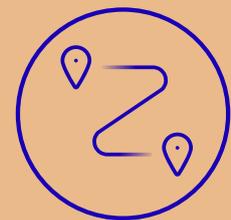
## 1. Show leadership

We will demonstrate visible senior leadership by highlighting the benefits of diversity and inclusion in both internal and external messaging and action.



## 2. Make a plan

We will create a plan including targets where appropriate, and any other action needed to: address under-representation; reduce identified pay gaps; and/or ensure equitable development and progression for all.



## 3. Shape the culture

We will prominently display messages promoting an inclusive culture and making it clear that inappropriate or discriminatory language or behaviour will not be tolerated.



## 4. Be transparent

We will publish an annual report detailing the progress made against our targets and setting out our plans for the next 12 months.



## 5. Be accountable

We will show board-level accountability by assigning responsibility for these charter commitments to the CEO or a named Director.



# 1. Show leadership



“We will demonstrate visible senior leadership by highlighting the benefits of diversity and inclusion in both internal and external messaging and action.”

Without leadership from the top of the organisation, there can be no real commitment in the rest of it, and the journey will never start. Leadership consists of articulating a vision for where the organisation is going, including what is expected of employees to get there. Making an organisation more diverse and inclusive requires effort and is likely to meet resistance. Therefore, direction from those in leadership positions must be unequivocal, or people will say they lack time and resource to make the necessary changes.



How can leadership teams show visible leadership? First, they must familiarise themselves with the issues and get clear on the benefits of diversity and inclusion and what is at stake for the business if the status quo is not challenged. The business case is compelling. An organisation with a workforce that reflects the population at large, with its diversity of experience and perspective, will be better placed to respond to the needs of client organisations who are similarly diverse. Those that can demonstrate openness to people of all backgrounds will be more attractive to people of all backgrounds, which will make it easier for that employer to recruit the talent it needs. Directors and chief executives will need to raise their own awareness and appreciation of the business case and become genuine advocates of it. Where boards are not aligned on the issue, chief executives may want to bring in expertise for a development exercise, allowing people both to learn and air their concerns.

When company boards are aligned and resolved to move forward on diversity and inclusion, there will be an initial statement of intent, but it can't be left at that: boards will need to weave the message into ongoing communications, both internal and external, or the workforce assumes it is a passing fad.

Aside from issuing statements, construction business leaders can take action to show they are serious. For example, they can invest resource in getting recognised in one of the indices that rank companies on diversity and inclusion. In January 2020, Mace entered Stonewall's UK Workplace Equality Index for the first time, placing 142nd of 503 companies ranked.<sup>14</sup> For the past three years, Willmott Dixon has entered and been listed in the Times Top 50 Employers for Women list.

Gaining such recognition takes effort but delivers four valuable dividends. First, it focuses and guides a company in its practical efforts to be more diverse and inclusive. Second, it becomes a valuable marketing asset, a vivid story that differentiates a company in the eyes of clients. Third, it sends a clear message to potential recruits that the company takes the issue seriously and is intent on making progress. And fourth, it inspires a company's workforce, cementing its collective self-perception as a positive, inclusive organisation and spurring the drive to improve.

Other actions senior leadership can take include speaking at events, within and outside the organisation. Here, it is important for leaders to speak honestly, admitting that it is a learning process and that the business may not yet have attained its goals but that there is a commitment to progress. Leaders can also listen. Willmott Dixon set up local steering and focus groups across the company, with members of the board taking careful note of the outcomes.

Outside the company, construction business leaders can raise awareness and expectations for diversity and inclusion among companies in their supply chains, says Jane Dackiewicz, head of human resources at SCAPE, one of the UK's leading public sector procurement authorities, that procures framework construction packages for local government: "When we put frameworks together, companies must



submit their diversity policies, so we see that big companies are talking the talk, but the next step would be for them to use their influence to encourage and support the companies in their supply chains to begin increasing diversity."

Further ways of demonstrating visible senior leadership are outlined in the next chapter, 'Make a plan', and are bound up in the subsequent charter items.

## 2. Make a plan



“We will create a plan including targets where appropriate, and any other action needed to: address under-representation; reduce identified pay gaps; and/or ensure equitable development and progression for all.”

Visible senior leadership should translate into a clear plan of action. The plan should include stretching but realistic targets for increased representation of underrepresented groups in the workforce. However, setting good targets requires knowing where you are now, because you won't know if you are moving forward if you don't know where you started. So, the first step in creating the plan is collecting data on the current state of diversity in your organisation. Having identified where you are, you can decide on the actions that stand a chance of moving you toward the targets.

Collecting data to build an accurate picture of your workforce now is a development exercise in its own right. The recruitment process may generate some data, such as age and gender but not, typically, data on important diversity markers including disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. Rather than a one-off, snapshot survey, experts recommend ongoing data collection because people change – they might become disabled, for instance – and a one-off survey will have a limited shelf life. More regular surveys will help keep the picture accurate and up to date. Broadening data collected at the

recruitment stage will help companies identify unintended barriers in the recruitment process itself.

Data collection campaigns should be accompanied by a well thought through communications campaign setting out why you are collecting the data and how it will be stored. Organisations must also ensure GDPR compliance. “The challenges of collecting personal staff data are absolutely not insurmountable and public sector employers have been doing so as a matter of course since before the Equality Act (2010),” says the CIOB's Mark Harrison. “But it does require some forethought and communications work.”

As well as collecting quantitative data, companies are advised to collect qualitative data through, for instance, focus groups and surveys in order to gauge sentiment in the workforce, which hard numbers won't convey. Do people feel welcome? Do they have a sense of belonging? This is emerging as an important factor in business success. A recent study by the consultancy BetterUp found that workplace belonging leads to a 56% increase in job performance, a 50% reduction in turnover risk, and a 75% decrease in employee sick days.<sup>15</sup> Understanding



workforce sentiment will help build an accurate picture of an organisation's current state of inclusion and belonging, and help identify necessary actions.

Learning resources for monitoring workplace diversity are available at the Supply Chain Sustainability School,<sup>16</sup> and useful tips on reassuring employees on data collection are provided by Stonewall.<sup>17</sup>

Having established the state of diversity in an organisation, targets can be set. For example, after launching a gender diversity steering group and local action groups at the end of 2016, Willmott Dixon has an aim of achieving 50% gender parity across its workforce by 2030, a stretching target, but not impossible.

With targets set, you are in a position to devise a plan setting out the actions you will take. While responsibility for meeting the targets must ultimately rest with a named director on the board, as set out in charter item five, the plan will be more effective if it is created and evaluated in

consultation with employees throughout the organisation, rather than it being imposed from the top.

This helps to ensure the plan is relevant to the organisation's needs and that people can buy into it, becoming, themselves, agents for change in the business.

What the specific actions in the plan are will depend on your organisation's unique context and diversity profile. Those already on the journey advise against seeking one or two big levers to pull, because they may not exist. Instead, companies should seek to initiate a range of measures across the board to move forward. For those just beginning the journey, a number of existing initiatives disseminate ideas and best practice. These include construction-specific ones, such as the Supply Chain Sustainability School<sup>18</sup> and the Building Equality alliance,<sup>19</sup> and ones aimed at all employers, such as the Employers Network for Equality & Inclusion.<sup>20</sup>

Some actions are already popular, such as appointing female or ethnic minority staff members as STEM ambassadors for schools ('STEM' is the acronym for science, technology, engineering and maths).<sup>21</sup> This is a long-term outreach strategy that counters negative stereotypes about the industry and encourages children from underrepresented groups to imagine a career in it for themselves.

In a bid to target young people closer to employment age, some companies have partnered with colleges and universities that have already succeeded in channelling a diverse student body into construction-related programmes. Since choosing Leeds College of Building as a training provider four years ago,

UK contractor BAM said in 2021 that 30% of its apprentices in construction management, site supervision, quantity surveying and civil engineering are female, while BAME representation in apprenticeships stands at 15%.<sup>22</sup>

Another strategy is actively recruiting apprentices and graduate trainees from the diverse communities in which a company is working. London, UK-based contractor Ardmore said in 2017 that it had achieved 31% female representation among its 348 staff and just under 17% BAME representation by recruiting where they are building. “We’re building a project here in the middle of a housing estate, redeveloping it piecemeal over a number of years,” said health and safety director Bryan Toone. “Those people have a lot to put up with and one of the ways we can give something back to them is to employ them.”<sup>23</sup>

One of Willmott Dixon’s strategies has been to target management trainees. In 2018, it set a target that 50% of its management trainee intake would be women, and achieved 51%.<sup>24</sup> To build on this, and to ensure a new generation of women could grow into future leadership roles, the company successfully applied for CITB funding to launch its [Women’s Leadership Development Programme](#) with Cambridge Judge Business School, with 17 high-potential female leaders becoming the first cohort in 2021.

A degree of realism is needed when setting targets. Most companies will not create enough new jobs to achieve gender parity in a short space of time. However, they will reap business and human dividends in becoming more diverse and inclusive.



# ‘Many efforts in motion’: DPR Construction, USA

US national contractor DPR Construction was an early adopter of measures to increase diversity and inclusion. We asked them for an overview of their ongoing plans and this is what they said:

“DPR Construction has many efforts in motion to increase the diversity of its workforce. Recruiting-specific activities are front and centre. A major element is diversifying where DPR recruits with a concerted focus on historically Black colleges and universities, and specific recruiting events that connect traditionally underrepresented groups to job opportunities.

To ensure increased diversity can be sustained, DPR is expanding unconscious bias training to a wider pool of DPR employees.



CAPTION: Nancy Martinez, left, is a crew leader and Black Hat Safety Supervisor – a frontline safety advocate – for DPR Construction (Photograph by Matt Pranzo/Courtesy of DPR Construction)

“This is paired with a drive to take bias out of the interview process. DPR is evaluating job descriptions and replacing education requirements with job experience when appropriate.

“We are also ensuring interview panels include diverse team members and integrating unconscious-bias mitigation techniques into the interview and hiring process.

“To ensure increased diversity can be sustained, DPR is expanding unconscious bias training to a wider pool of DPR employees, around 800 people to date, and a series of inclusion-focused monthly webinars are fostering discussions and helping develop a truly inclusive culture.”

## 3. Shape the culture



“We will prominently display messages promoting an inclusive culture and making it clear that inappropriate or discriminatory language or behaviour will not be tolerated.”

When people from underrepresented groups start to be represented in greater numbers on our sites and in our offices as a result of leadership from the top and an effective diversity action plan, the environment must be one that allows them to stay and thrive. They will not feel welcome if they encounter hostility, humour that is demeaning (whether intended or not), and undue attention paid to the characteristic that sets them apart. As a predominantly white and male-dominated industry, construction



in many instances has further to go in creating and sustaining a culture in which differences in gender, sexual orientation, race, cultural background and ability do

not matter. That effort is complicated by the nature of a construction project, which sees teams from diverse organisations, all with their own cultures, converging on a site.

The culture of an organisation and of a project are complex and cannot be changed instantly. Humans naturally seek out affinity groups – other people who seem to be like them in appearance, background and outlook. Left unattended, cultures breed micro-cultures of exclusion because affinity groups tend to define themselves in ‘us-and-them’ terms. In these micro-cultures are unspoken assumptions about what’s acceptable and what isn’t, encompassing humour, conceptions of right and wrong, status, how conflict is handled, and more. When such micro-cultures foster dismissive or hostile attitudes towards people who are different, they must be addressed.

It starts with an organisation’s leadership communicating its expectations that everyone in the company and on site will be treated with the courtesy and respect we all deserve as people. This encourages everyone to feel empowered to challenge discrimination. Willmott Dixon started with a poster campaign under the banner, ‘Respect in the workplace’, featuring the slogan, ‘If in doubt, leave it out’ with relatable



scenarios depicting awkward moments where a joke goes too far or something comes out wrong. This recognised on the one hand that norms are changing and that people worry about what they're 'allowed to say these days', while on the other hand reminding people that exclusionary micro-cultures are not acceptable and that courteous and respectful behaviour is professional behaviour, and is normal and expected. "It can be difficult but it does actually make us better people," says Andrew Geldard, Willmott Dixon's chief communications officer. "We might say something that we think is funny but that gives offence to other people. We didn't set out to make anyone feel bad, so it's good to have that awareness."

The company followed that campaign with one featuring the slogan, 'If in doubt, call it out', a step further that encouraged people to challenge discriminatory behaviour when they witnessed it. This campaign was accompanied by guidance on how to call out unacceptable behaviour, offering strategies and things to say that keep challenges proportionate and avoid unnecessary conflict and loss of face.

Company leaders may themselves feel awkward and uncomfortable with this topic. Experts advise them to be open about this and to admit that they're on a journey of learning and heightened awareness like everyone else. Norms and language may be in flux, but the goal is simply to create a culture in which people advance according to merit, and everyone is treated with courtesy and respect, which benefits everyone.



# “Then nooses started appearing at our job sites”

As protests swept the United States and the world after the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020, Canadian contractor EllisDon may not have expected racism to rear its head within its operations.

“When people come to Canada, we celebrate their differences, we welcome their culture. We proudly proclaim that Canada is a cultural mosaic,” wrote EllisDon operations director, Jane Chapman. “We may also think that racism doesn’t touch our industry. Construction and the construction services industry employs people from all walks of life, from all trades, it’s a universal language. We might have convinced ourselves that racism wasn’t a problem at EllisDon.

We must do more:  
we must actively  
endorse inclusivity  
across our business.



Artist's render of the Michael Garron Hospital redevelopment in Toronto, being carried out by EllisDon. Two nooses were discovered on the construction site on 10 June 2020 (Image from EllisDon)

“But then nooses started appearing at our job sites.”<sup>26</sup>

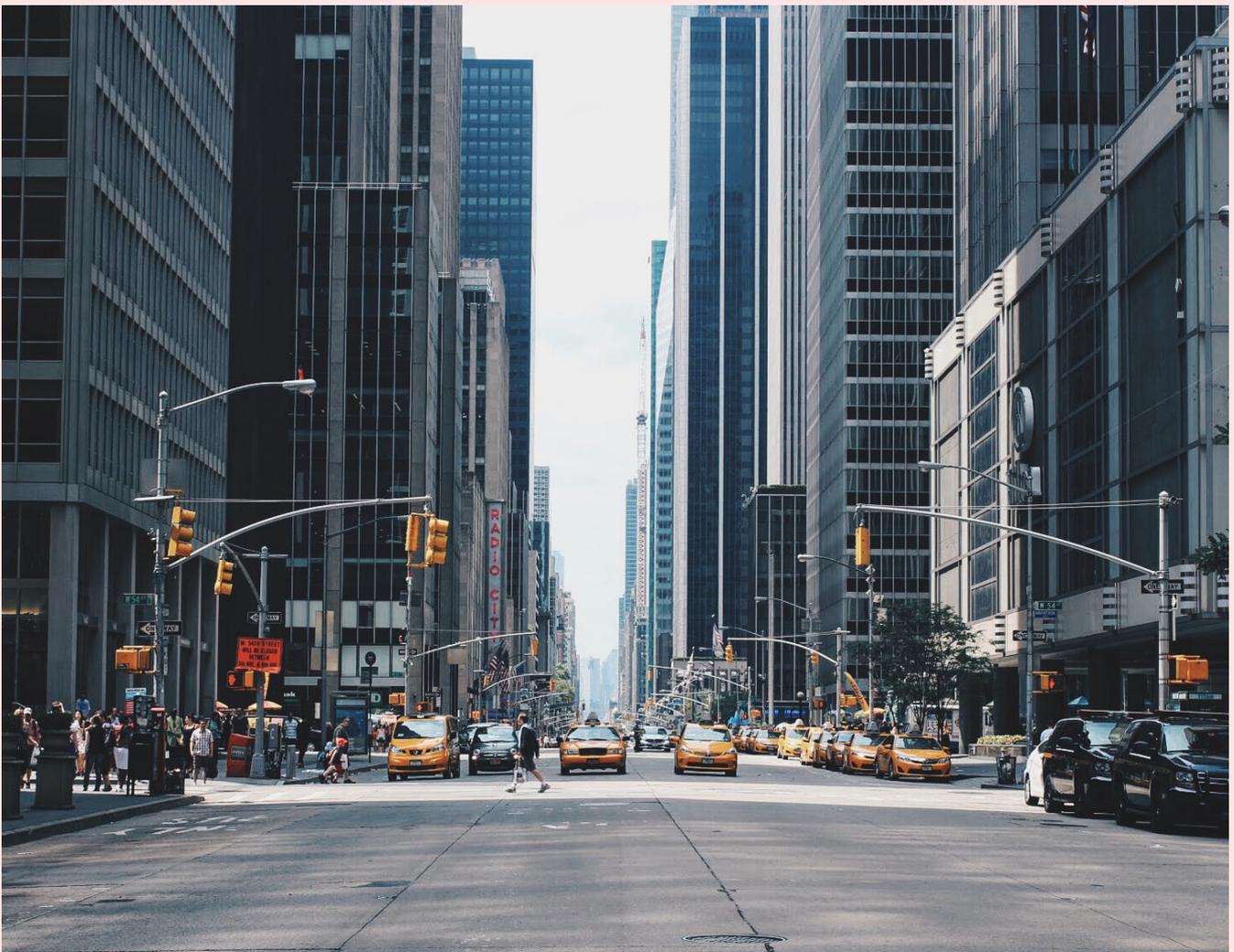
Chapman was referring to the discovery of two nooses anonymously left at the site of the Michael Garron Hospital redevelopment project in Toronto on 10 June that year – nooses being gruesome symbols reminiscent of the deadly lynchings of black people once common in the American South. They appeared on a number of construction sites in the US and Canada in 2020.

A police investigation ensued, with EllisDon offering a C\$50,000 reward for information leading to the conviction of the person or persons responsible. A 34-year-old man was arrested and charged with mischief and criminal harassment on 10 December.

As a result of this incident, EllisDon took comprehensive action, led by the board of directors, to ensure there was no place for racism at its sites and operations. As well as messaging, actions included increasing sanctions for sub-trades found accountable for racist or discriminatory actions; working with unions on how to educate and eradicate racism; and providing complimentary diversity and inclusion training to subcontractors and unions.<sup>27</sup>

It established the EllisDon Anti-Racism and Intolerance Group, with Jane Chapman as chair. (Chapman wrote the words above when announcing the formation of the group.) EllisDon's chief strategy officer, Jody Becker, was named as the group's executive sponsor.

Chapman noted the message of EllisDon chief executive Geoff Smith: there was no place for racists at EllisDon. "But we must do more: we must actively endorse inclusivity across our business," she wrote. "We must actively speak out against racism and intolerance of any kind."



## 4. Be transparent



“We will publish an annual report detailing the progress made against our targets and setting out our plans for the next 12 months.”

Another example of an organisation’s leadership showing its resolve, an annual report is an opportunity to celebrate success, renew focus, evaluate strategies and make new ones. This is the natural place to publish progress against headline targets and updates on actions to be taken to meet them. Because it shows progress or otherwise, the annual report acts as insurance

against companies hiding behind fine words. It can be a motivational tool, engendering pride among the workforce that progress is being made as well as hunger for more. It is also a recruiting tool. People from underrepresented groups will be more attracted to companies who can demonstrate their commitment to diversity and inclusion, and their willingness to have that commitment held up to scrutiny.



# Tracking diversity at Skanska

When Stockholm-headquartered builder and developer Skanska AB started tracking gender representation in its workforce in 2016, men outnumbered women among group senior vice presidents by a ratio of just over 2:1. There were 33 women in the role and 67 men. Fast forward to 2019 and the ratio had been reversed: women held 67 of group senior vice president roles and men held 33.

In more senior roles, change has not been so dynamic. In 2016, only seven women held the title of business unit president, while 93 men could call themselves that. In 2018 that ratio budged slightly to 92:8, and stayed there until 2020, the latest year for which figures are available.

Skanska tracks these and other indicators of diversity and inclusion

Skanska tracks these and other indicators of diversity and inclusion and publishes them on its website.



Skanska's headquarters in Stockholm (Skanska)

and publishes them on its website along with data on health and safety, ethics and environmental performance under the heading, 'Sustainability reporting and rankings'.<sup>28</sup>

It shows that in 2020, women comprised 21% of all Skanska employees in Sweden, 10% of all employees in Finland, 17% of all employees in Norway, and 21% of all employees in Central Europe.

To track sentiment pertaining to inclusion in general, Skanska conducts an annual survey asking employees if they agree or disagree with three statements, as follows:

"My manager makes the most of the diversity in the team to achieve stronger performance together."

"My workplace is free from bullying and harassment."

"At my workplace, people care for each other and treat each other fairly."

When reporting began in 2017, the percentage of people agreeing with these statements stood at 70%, 85% and 82%, respectively. Results improved in each subsequent year: in 2020, the figures, respectively, were 76%, 88% and 86%. In addition to tracking total results, Skanska says it tracks gaps between different groups, and compares the overall result with general industry benchmark.

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important is  
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## 5. Be accountable



“We will show top level accountability by assigning responsibility for these charter commitments to the CEO or a named Director.”

Unless someone at the top is made accountable for these charter commitments and for making progress, a company's genuine aspiration to be more diverse and inclusive is at risk of failing. Someone with the power to make things happen must make things happen, or companies will fall back into routine.

The director in charge can't be expected personally to do everything themselves, but they can set up the organisational structures, such as steering groups or action committees, that get things done. They can also act as a conduit between the organisation and its various levels and the collective responsibility of the board.

Very large multinationals can appoint a director and give them an appropriate budget and staff with an order to get the company into the top five places in a given league table or index within a certain time period; and it will likely happen. Smaller companies face tighter constraints. Most likely a director will need to add diversity and inclusion to their existing portfolio of accountabilities. However, if a board believes, as we do, that diversity and inclusion is a matter of vital strategic importance for the business, it will need to take a collegial approach and make adjustments to support that director.

And it should be emphasised that is not necessary for the named director to be a member of an underrepresented group. The aim is, after-all a meritocratic approach as the ethos of diversity and inclusion is that roles should be attributed on the basis of relevant skills and experience, rather than personal characteristics. Colleagues from underrepresented groups must, of course, be consulted, listened-to and amplified. But as the benefits of inclusive practices will be felt by all, it is neither equitable, nor practical, for those who have personally experienced disadvantage to have responsibility for promoting fairness in the workplace. What is important is that everyone understands the business benefits of diversity, not who is championing it at any given time.



# Maverick CEO pioneers five-day week

When industry veteran Alison Mirams was appointed chief executive of Sydney, Australia-based contractor Roberts Co in 2017, she was given a blank slate to change the way the company operated for the better.

Having risen from contracts administrator to commercial manager to regional director at Multiplex before joining Roberts Co, she had a very clear picture of the industry's dysfunctions. The suicide rate among construction workers in Australia is more than double the national average, with construction workers six times more likely to die of suicide than workplace accidents. Women leave the industry six times faster than men, and the human cost of the industry's high-pressure culture is estimated to be some A\$6bn a year.

If we didn't do something different when we had a blank sheet of paper, it would have been the most enormous waste.



Alison Mirams, CEO of Roberts Co

"I just thought we've got to be a catalyst for change," she says. "If we didn't do something different when we had a blank sheet of paper, it would have been the most enormous waste."

One of her ideas for making the company more humane and inclusive for everybody was simply to give people weekends off, a radical idea in Australian construction where a six-day week is the traditional norm, making it extremely difficult for women to work in construction since childcare is only available on weekdays.

In 2019, Roberts Co bid for the project to build the A\$341m first stage of the Concord Hospital Redevelopment in Sydney, involving the design and construction of a 44,000-sq-m clinical services building. In fact, the company submitted two bids, one committing Roberts Co and its supply chain to deliver the project on a traditional six-day basis, and another on a five-day basis.

But she delivered a tough message to the client, NSW Health Infrastructure. "We said you of all people can't allow someone to die by suicide caused by workplace stress when we're building a hospital to make people better," Mirams says. "It's not right. We said here's a

five-day programme and here's a six-day programme, but understand that under the six-day programme, there might be a suicide from stress. And to their credit, they said okay, what's the cost?" The time implication was 10 extra weeks, carrying an estimated cost of A\$2.5m, which the client agreed to absorb.

Miramis describes the project as an "overwhelming success." She says people on the project, including subcontractors, report being happier, less stressed, excited to come to work Mondays, and able to spend meaningful time with family. Its five-day week has garnered the project national and international media coverage, and the University of New South Wales has been studying the impact on the mental health and wellbeing of workers and families. Its findings were due to be published in the fourth quarter of 2021.

She also retooled Roberts Co's business processes, stripping out valueless bureaucratic impediments from the supply chain and focussing strongly

on effective design management to keep progress flowing smoothly. She says subcontractor foremen tell her the Concord job is the safest, most productive and enjoyable site they are working on. "The reality is, we probably won't use the whole 10 extra weeks," she said. "We'll use some of that time, and if it wasn't for Covid I doubt we'd have used any of it."

The project has also become a powerful recruitment tool. As news of it has spread, job applications from women have flooded in. "People are saying, can I come and work for you? This is awesome! Especially women. We see women leaving the industry in their 20s because they think they can't have a child and work on site," Miramis says.

She adds: "The struggle to change is really hard. The industry has a skills shortage because we're not attracting enough people and yet it's fixated on a six-day week because that's the way we've always done it. It's so stupid, it hurts."



## Conclusion:

# Make a start

“While some construction organisations have advanced quite far along the path to diversity and inclusion, and are starting to see results, it is important to keep in mind that every organisation begins where they are.”

**The important thing is to acknowledge where we are, make a plan, be transparent, and keep moving forward.**

It has been observed that once an organisation starts building momentum, progress accelerates. When that organisation can demonstrate genuine commitment to diversity and inclusion, people from underrepresented groups are more likely to have faith in it as a welcoming place to work. If its culture becomes genuinely more welcoming and inclusive, people’s experiences justify that initial faith. When people feel positive about their work, they talk about it in their social networks and the organisation’s good reputation spreads organically, completing the virtuous circle.

Reform initiatives over the decades in construction have tended to address the industry as a whole, as if it were a unified entity that can change. This charter takes a different view. The industry is, in fact, an agglomeration of thousands of individual organisations, and the capacity for real change resides in each one. It further sees huge potential for companies to make real progress in becoming diverse, inclusive and welcoming places to work, with tangible competitive advantage accruing to those who do.



It is important to keep in mind that every organisation begins where they are

The important thing to acknowledge is where we are, make a plan, be transparent, and keep moving forward.

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# Contact us

We are committed to contributing to a diverse and inclusive construction sector, one which delivers the best opportunities and better outcomes for those that create the built environment.

**If you would like to get involved contact our Head of EDI Transformation on [inclusion@ciob.org.uk](mailto:inclusion@ciob.org.uk).**

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