



Compelling or compulsory: Why diversity in construction makes business sense and how to start achieving it

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Though it's improving, women and people from BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) communities are still underrepresented at board level in construction, limiting the sector's ability to deliver all that it might and ensure it's relevant to many of its customers and their customers too.

Underrepresentation at board level often goes hand-in-hand with a failure to attract diverse talent at every level, from those working on sites to those deciding the priorities of the business.

If you're thinking diversity is a 'nice-to-have', you're probably overlooking the evidence that it's really a game changer; a differentiator between those who win the most work, win it profitably and on a sustainable basis.

So how do you actually go out about making diversity a reality?

Boards need to act

Years of experience suggests diverse boards recruit from a broader range of backgrounds and experiences, people who, in turn, bring a variety of perspectives.

In complex and uncertain times, all businesses need people who can see the world from different angles, solve problems in new and creative ways and attract others with talent who may not have considered the business or the industry.

Simply put, boards need to think, speak and act differently and model that for the whole of their business.

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Some argue for positive action or quotas; others challenge such an approach. The reality is, however, if you've never seen a woman or a BAME board member, site manager, surveyor or engineer, how can you expect to attract the best and ensure you are fishing in the widest talent pool?

Whether you're building a school, fitting out a new office or developing a shopping mall, your workforce is on display and how they look, work, speak and think will attract or repel others.

Young people and late entrants to the market alike need to know that there is a place for them in an industry that is central to the success of the UK and its economy.

The more people bring a rich variety of experiences the more



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likely you are to trade differently, adapt or transform how your business works, develop new products and services and see under-met market gaps.

Asking questions

So how do you do something about it? Where could you start?

First start by understanding the impact low diversity makes to your business - what is it costing your business, what opportunities are you missing and what could it be worth investing in to address it?

Do you know what kind of culture you have and what might need to change to make it more open to newcomers? What do you reward?

Secondly, if you thought about the end user, do your people know and understand what may matter to them?

How do you engage your customer's customer at every stage? If your customers look like you – do theirs?

"Attracting a diversity of people at every level has to be better than waiting to be compelled"

When you do pre-construction and post-occupancy reviews, whose voices do you hear and what impact have you had in the wider community?

Make your business open-minded and innovative. Ask yourself whether the built form made a difference to the end users'

business. How much more business might come your way if you did know the answer?

Clearly there are other steps to take – however, the first step is to consider the business case.

If you buy that it will impact 'prosperity' – positively impacting people, planet and profits - then get your board right and see what happens next. Talent has choices and being irresistible, attracting a diversity of people at every level, has to be better than waiting to be compelled.

Liz Cross is managing director at The Correctives and works with a number of the sector's leading UK and global construction businesses. She chaired and compered the Women in Construction Awards for its first five years and is currently a judge at the Women in Housing Awards

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