

News

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Increasing diversity: how to attract and encourage a more diverse workforce

Our HR Director, Dawn Moore, was asked ahead of the CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) Diversity and Inclusion Conference to discuss the key principles and actions we have taken as a business towards achieving a more diverse workforce.

Short term thinking gets you nowhere

While any initiative to improve workplace diversity is to be welcomed, it can't be something that is rushed into for short term gain. Ultimately, making substantial changes to a workplace culture, such as becoming a lot more diverse, will be a long journey that requires buy-in from your wider business, including very senior managers who need to visibly role model the right thinking. There are no quick fixes and to develop a truly diverse workforce, you need to first challenge, and then change, thinking and behaviour.

This will not always be easy and may result in some difficult conversations with colleagues on occasions. People who have worked in a profession or a particular sector for a long time, while consistently achieving results, may struggle to appreciate why change is needed. It is important to convey why it is important for the workplace to reflect the society we live in, both for the benefit of the individual and the company as a whole and be able to very clearly link those debates to how doing things differently will help the company address challenges it is currently facing (such as skills shortages).

A huge focus for us in Morgan Sindall Construction & Infrastructure is to attract diversity across all groups. To achieve this we have a multi-faceted approach, including going into schools to speak about the many opportunities that are available in the construction industry to try and attract the next generation of talent, to innovative recruitment techniques like virtual careers fairs to increase accessibility to our vacancies and our work in partnership with ex-military personnel, the disabled community and a national programme offering work opportunities to the homeless. Last year Morgan Sindall Construction & Infrastructure attended over 500 events across the country, and we've already seen this pay off with the number of applications for roles across the business from an incredibly diverse range of candidates, including those who otherwise would not have looked at our sector.

Flexible working is the future

Construction is traditionally a male dominated industry, and one of the reasons it has historically struggled to attract more of the female talent pool, those with caring responsibilities of all types and several other groups is the perceived fixed hours and lack of flexibility. In order to counter this, at Morgan Sindall Construction & Infrastructure we examine every role we have and try to look at ways we could offer flexible working - for instance, could the individual work closer to home or could we utilise technology so they could work from another site? We encourage our staff to have regular conversations about how rotas and working patterns can be adapted to support the changing individual needs of our teams. It is about being practical, as not all arrangements work for all types of roles and/or sites, but it's the willingness to at least have the conversation and work together to help individuals where we can that matters.

The approach works - over the past two years, all members of staff have benefited and the number of women in our business has doubled to 21.5 per cent with over 60 per cent of our workforce having some kind of flexible/agile working arrangement. However achieving a truly balanced workforce will not happen overnight, and it's vital for employers to continually evaluate their culture, thinking, behaviours and policies in order to maintain progression.

Culture change is key - not hitting targets

In order to create true diversity you need to develop a company culture that people want to be part of, and where people want to stay. It is inclusion that will drive diversity rather than the other way round. Companies should not be afraid of trying non-traditional recruitment methods, for example, as they need to recognise the importance of opening up opportunities, both internally and externally, in the most flexible and innovative way possible.

Our Returnships programme - designed for people returning to employment after a break of 18 months or more - has been a huge success, and part of the reason for that, based on the feedback we have had, is its innovative and flexible nature. Anyone looking to return to work can apply for a role with the opportunity for real career progression, and we can offer flexible working if that suits. Although we didn't set any specific targets when we developed the programme, 30 per cent of our applicants for the Returnships are from a BAME background and over 40 per cent from women - a huge improvement on the traditional application profile for the construction industry.

In summary there is not a one-size-fits all approach to diversity and it is a journey rather than a quick fix. However starting to challenge any thinking and behaviours that may inhibit change and proactively identifying any barriers and then how you can remove them is a good start. Change will come if the culture is right but it will take time.

Note: This article originally appeared on the CIPD website.