

Women in construction – addressing the skills shortage

In a traditionally male-dominated industry, the number of women starting a career in construction has been on a steady increase over the last decade. However, in an industry where economic growth outperforms many others, gender diversity is far from being solved. Women only represent around 12.5% of the 2.7m workforce (2019) and the vast majority are in professional roles (not trades). The industry is experiencing an urgent skills shortage to meet demand, so construction firms should be reviewing their strategies to (re)engage with women to achieve long-term objectives for all areas of their business.

After nearly 100 years since women were given the right to vote, we are finally seeing an encouraging level of progress in workforces across many traditionally male-dominated industries. One notable industry which is undergoing significant change in diversity, is the financial services industry, where several Government, professional body and enterprise initiatives have collectively driven change.

For the future success of the construction industry, Horizon Construction strongly believes more women are required in all professions. According to Reuters, the UK needs 400,000 additional people each year to meet the demand for new housing. From trades to executive roles, the barriers of entry, such as unconscious bias or misconceptions, need to be tackled. Numerous studies have shown that gender-diverse workforces improve the efficiency, quality and productivity of organisations. Procurement/tendering processes are also becoming more considerate of diversity within firms.

Historically, the reputation of the construction industry has been tarnished with discrimination and inappropriate comments towards women. Even though the industry has come a long way to eradicate its old reputation there is much more that can be done. Women should not feel they need thicker skin to survive in construction. Methods to counter these areas of concern and to attract women to careers in construction include more women in senior management positions and more awareness of role models throughout the industry.

The gender pay gap is another issue which needs to be dealt with. Industry figures vary depending on the type of role in construction, but the pay gap ranges from 4% (construction



Managing Director at Colchester-based Horizon Construction, Phil Holding, talks about the important role of women in professions throughout the construction industry.

project managers and related professional) to 24% (construction operatives) less than male counterparts. (Source: ONS.)

A key entry point for careers in construction is at the academic level. According to Go Construct, 37% of new entrants into the industry that came from higher education are women. Construction firms have a continuous role to work with institutions to encourage growth across all areas of construction, including trades, as well as to adopt strategies to retain women within their chosen career.

To conclude, there is much-untapped opportunity in the female labour market for improved business performance and to assist with a skills shortage. All firms in the construction industry need to focus on their approach to further engage with women and to deliver the required change.

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