

Roundtable

Building an inclusive culture

Robin Jones summarises the discussions from a recent roundtable, held at IStructE HQ, which explored aspects of discrimination faced by women in the engineering profession and ways in which the industry can work to tackle this and develop a more inclusive culture.

Introduction

A panel of 11 structural engineers and other built environment professionals gathered at the Institution of Structural Engineers on 27 March to talk about the experiences of women in the industry and how it can work to become more inclusive.

A quick poll of the participants revealed that 81% had worked in the industry for over a decade (with a third having at least 20 years behind them), while 18% had less than 10 years' experience; 82% felt that attitudes towards women had improved during their time in the industry, while 18% felt they had stayed the same.

Experiences shared

Despite the verdict that attitudes had improved, the panel clearly felt that there is still much work to be done to create a truly inclusive and diverse industry. The discussion therefore began with participants sharing some examples of their negative experiences over the years, with a view to encouraging discussion on what needs to change and how firms and managers can address these issues.

Discriminatory behaviour

One panellist described an incident early in her career in which a photo of a topless model had been stuck above her desk during a placement with a construction firm. At the time, as a young engineer, she had felt unable to challenge the behaviour and had tried to laugh it off as 'one of the lads'. But the experience had stayed with her as something women shouldn't have to put up with.

Another related her experience of being sexually harassed while working on a project. She had received emails with an unprofessional and inappropriate tone, which had escalated

to personal messages online and inappropriate physical contact when on site alone.

There had been a difficult atmosphere on the project and she had been reluctant to report the harassment formally, but she had asked her managers not to be sent to site alone. When a director did raise the issue with the firm in question, they were unwilling to take action unless a formal complaint was made.

A number of participants knew of examples where this type of behaviour had led to women moving away from project-delivery roles in their careers.

Another instance of harassment was described in which the panellist had received inappropriate calls, outside of working hours, from a member of the site team. Again, she hadn't reported it as she hadn't wanted the difficulty of dealing with the incident at the time.

One panellist described her experience of attending an industry event and being introduced to a male guest, who looked her over

from head to toe before telling her that she didn't 'look like an engineer'.

Structural discrimination

In more general terms, there was a shared view that women suffered discrimination from unsupportive work environments, particularly where employers have a strong 'presenteeism' culture: women who looked to work flexible hours due to family commitments could find their career and promotion prospects suffered. While this was viewed as an issue that disproportionately affects women, it was acknowledged that men could suffer too, e.g. with their career prospects harmed if they exercised their right to take paternity leave in a company culture that did not support this.

Panellists also described instances of removing an engagement or wedding ring at interview to avoid creating a perception that they might take maternity leave or a career break in the near future, and of women being overlooked



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“ MORE DIVERSE BOARDS AND MORE WOMEN IN DECISION- MAKING ROLES ARE NEEDED

It was also noted that it can be hard for women when breaking boundaries – becoming the first director on the company board, or setting up their own firm – and that mentoring and advice would be useful at such times. There was a view that the stress and responsibility of senior roles weighs more heavily on women, particularly at times when family life may bring external pressures.

In fact, having a network of mentors and allies to call on for support was felt to be valuable throughout one’s career, but a scarcity of senior women means that there may not be enough to offer mentoring to all individuals. Women entering the profession today may also have different expectations and experiences from those now in senior roles, who joined the profession at a time when women were greatly under-represented, which can create a gap in expectations between mentor and mentee.

HR policies

The panel felt that mental wellbeing and discrimination should be regarded in the same way as traditional health and safety, with it now seen as unacceptable for someone to be physically injured on site. Employers have a duty of care and companies need to have a mechanism for reporting incidents, with more senior women who these can be reported to if female staff are not comfortable reporting them to men.

However, many smaller firms don’t have dedicated HR departments and may lack the skills or experience to know how to respond to or address an issue. This can also be an issue for managers in general, who are typically promoted for their technical ability and need to be given the skills and confidence to manage teams and challenge poor behaviour – this could include quietly taking someone aside for a conversation, rather than escalating an incident formally. Companies need to find a way to address these issues.

It was also felt that firms should adopt a zero-tolerance stance towards discrimination, with policies in place to tackle this. Large companies were seen as more likely to implement formal policies, but in smaller firms the approach may depend on the attitudes of the directors or owners – so industry bodies need to reach these firms to encourage an inclusive approach and

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for promotion or not supported in pursuing chartered membership applications, despite holding the right qualifications. It was seen as common for women to be told they were ‘not ready yet’ without receiving any tangible advice on how they could achieve promotion.

Avoiding rocking the boat

Overall, the panel felt it was understandable that women would question themselves in these kinds of situation and be unwilling to ‘rock the boat’, particularly if they do not receive strong support from management. Contractual relationships were acknowledged to be a factor that made it harder to challenge poor behaviour from employees of other firms, but it was felt that a failure to take action creates an environment in which this kind of behaviour is tolerated.

Taking action

Support and mentoring

A number of areas were raised in which the panel felt women would benefit from more support at work. These included training or mentoring when returning to the profession after maternity leave or a longer career break to address any technical skills gaps that may have arisen and to restore confidence. Offering flexible working conditions would also help women to progress in their careers.

Panelists felt that women were more likely to leave the profession than men, with potential stages when this may happen being: i) when working towards chartership if they don’t receive sufficient support; ii) after maternity leave; iii) during menopause.

persuade them that looking after staff welfare is good for business.

Companies could also encourage and empower directors and managers to lead by example and challenge poor behaviour. Formal contracts could include a clause allowing a firm to exit a project if staff are subjected to inappropriate behaviour – in effect a breach of contract – or allowing managers or directors to issue a ‘stop work authority’ and temporarily withdraw their staff until the matter is resolved.

Companies could also do more to measure and report on diversity metrics, e.g. their gender pay gap. While larger firms have a legal requirement to report their gender pay gap in the UK, it was felt that it would be beneficial for equality in the industry if smaller firms also did this – although it was acknowledged that a lack of HR resources may be an obstacle.

Ensuring anonymity

In discussions around the response to the earlier example of a panellist subjected to harassment, there was a shared view that she should have received more support – and that it shouldn’t be necessary to make a formal complaint in order for action to be taken. The panel felt that an instance of physical violence against a man would have elicited a much firmer response.

Not wanting to be named in a complaint or not wanting to make a formal complaint about an incident was a common theme, and the panel felt that the industry needs to find ways to allow anonymous reporting, or for incidents to be addressed without the victim being named.

One suggestion put forward was that, in this type of situation if disciplinary action is not possible, firms could run training to address the behaviour exhibited with the aim of changing their culture. Indeed, one panellist related an experience in which capturing a screenshot of an inappropriate message had allowed the recipient’s manager to raise it with the contractor, with the result that the firm had run a ‘toolbox’ training talk run for staff – this was seen as an exemplary approach.

In this instance, the sender of the message had also been transferred away from the project to make the recipient feel comfortable on site, and again the panel felt that this was a supportive approach to take.

Allies and attitudes

The panel noted that it was important for women to have male allies to support efforts to tackle discrimination or harassment and to develop a more inclusive culture. Several panellists described it as empowering to have male allies speak up and condemn inappropriate behaviour where they witness it. There was a shared view that women would like to receive active support and to be backed up unconditionally when facing discrimination or harassment.

However, there was also acknowledgement that attitudes need to change at a societal

level – with a view that this needs to start with education at school. Nonetheless, this should not preclude efforts to change attitudes among those already working in the sector and to explore and challenge the views of men not perceived as being ‘allies’.

Finally, it was also noted that equality, diversity and inclusivity (EDI) programmes are sometimes perceived as being about promoting less qualified female, LGBTQ+ or minority ethnic employees at the expense of male, heterosexual or white employees. This perception needs to be challenged to emphasise that EDI is not about competition, but about equality of opportunity and overcoming unconscious biases.

Representative management

The panel felt that more diverse and representative leadership teams would help to create an environment in which women were more comfortable speaking up about issues that they face in the workplace, and in which senior leaders had more experience of the issues being raised.

A leadership team that reflects the company’s staff and their family situations, e.g. where directors openly work flexible hours or take time off for family events, would also set an example that other staff can follow.

Panellists noted that the Covid-19 pandemic had had a positive effect in this regard, with men becoming more aware of the impact of family life on work, thanks to home schooling, and having to conduct video calls while their children were present.

It was also noted that there is evidence that men often promote in their own image, leading to qualified women in an organisation being overlooked for promotion. Having more diverse boards and more women in decision-making roles would help to overcome this, as would boards recognising their own deficits in skills and diversity. There is also evidence that companies

with diverse boards are more successful.

However, panellists also cautioned that, in the past, women reaching senior positions had often had to adopt ‘male behaviours’ and an attitude of ‘getting on with the job’ in the face of discrimination. There was a shared view that women should be able to ‘be themselves’ at work and succeed in their careers without having to act more like men – this is key to equality.

Changing perceptions of engineering

There was also a discussion around how to encourage more women into the engineering profession. The panel felt that girls are often put off by outdated perceptions among their teachers and parents of what the job involves, and are often told that the STEM sector is not suitable for them; many female engineers have attended an all-girls school where there may be more positive expectations for girls around science and engineering.

One panellist noted that research by school governors had shown that young girls respond positively to engineering when it is described as being about teamwork and working for the benefit of society. This (non-gendered) message needs to be emphasised in order to educate girls, parents and teachers about what engineering involves and why it is an attractive career for women.

How could the IStructE support this agenda?

Participants also shared their ideas for ways in which the Institution could support the profession to become more inclusive. Topics raised ranged from analysing diversity data, to transparency over pay gaps in the industry, to mentoring, training and support networks for women, and HR resources for smaller practices. Overall, there was a desire to see inclusive values become more widely embraced across the profession.



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