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Can diversity, equality, and inclusion help solve the construction skills crisis?

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The construction skills crisis has persisted for over two decades. Despite targeted efforts, it continues to worsen, driven by an aging workforce and talent retention challenges.

Simultaneously, diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) is gaining recognition as a driver of workplace culture, employee satisfaction, and business success. Could DEI offer solutions to the long-standing skills crisis?

In a recent roundtable discussion construction and social value leaders came together to discuss this topic.

Diversifying employment

Vicky Brook - chair of the Women's Leadership Group and founder of P3CL, made a case for this diversification to help narrow the 224,900 person recruitment void:

"With the women into construction offering ceasing, I have been in discussion with a number of organisations who see a significant need to bring diverse talent into the sector. At the core of these discussions is the aim of tackling DEI head on, with efforts that focus on women as well as other marginalised groups. The only way we can establish a best-in-class workforce is by attracting quality candidates that are keen to learn, and developing their skills through education pathways, alongside comprehensive training. This approach will increase both recruitment figures and retention. So yes, I do think DEI can assist the skills gap."

In response, Nicola Hodkinson – owner and director of Seddon, gave an alternative perspective.

Hodkinson said: "I don't believe the two necessarily are that linked. The only way we're going to narrow the employee skills gap is by employing new people. There are currently thousands of hopeful construction workers in higher education who will never come into our industry because the employment opportunities are not there. We have a self-employed sector with a head-down attitude, looking only at today and not at the future of taking on apprentices."

"It is a shame because we know that our current industry is not diverse, which means diversity hinges so much on new recruits. But we are not going to get those new recruits as it currently stands. There is no doubt that having a diverse pool would make the industry so much better. But sadly I don't think it's going to make any difference over the next decade in my working life."

Using culture to support growth

Beyond recruitment, workplace culture plays a defining role in whether employees stay and thrive. Tina Chander - partner and head of employment law at Wright Hassall, emphasised that many businesses struggle to move beyond DEI as a compliance exercise and embed it into everyday operations.

She said: “DEI shouldn’t be a policy that sits on a shelf. It should be part of workplace culture, ensuring that every employee - regardless of background - has access to the same opportunities. That doesn’t mean ticking boxes. It means making inclusion an integral part of how the business operates.”

Hodkinson also stressed the importance of retaining talent within the sector, not just within individual companies, saying: “We need to stop thinking about retention purely in terms of keeping talent within our own businesses. The real goal is keeping skilled workers within the industry as a whole. If they need to move companies to grow, that’s still a win for construction.”

She also pointed out that career progression pathways need to be flexible.

She said: “Not everyone wants to be a manager. Forcing people into leadership roles when they’d rather specialise is a mistake. We need clear lateral development routes to ensure talented individuals don’t leave because they see no future.”

Inclusive data to support skills

One of the key takeaways from the roundtable, which was hosted by Rumpus and the P3CL Women’s Leadership Group, was that DEI data could play a fundamental role in understanding the composition of the workforce and where the gaps lie.

Mark Harrison, head of DEI transformation at the CIOB highlighted the importance of robust data collection in making informed decisions.

He said: “Data is critical to understanding where underrepresentation exists, at what levels, and in which roles. The data that we currently have in the sector leaves a lot of room for improvement.

“The ONS Labour Force Survey is limited in its scope. The Supply Chain Sustainability School Annual Diversity Report has larger coverage but it is still limited in terms of what it reports. For example, it doesn’t report on professions, it tells us the number of female employees in a given company, but not the level or role they are in. These are things we need to continue to push for.”

Ellie Jenkins – partner at the built environment consultancy, Akerlof, emphasised the need for a mix of quantitative and qualitative data to create meaningful change.

She said: “As a sector, we often focus on binary metrics like gender representation and the pay gap. While these are important, they don’t explain any underlying causes, or how to address them. We need to balance quantitative data with qualitative insights on how employees feel - whether they feel valued and equipped to thrive at work.

“Couple this with long-term evaluation, such as looking back at an apprenticeship programme to work out the career paths of the women that were recruited 10 years ago - are they still with the company? And if not, are they still in the sector? If we can move towards a more long-term view of the work we’re doing for skills in the sector, we can begin to see the impact that it’s having, not just tomorrow or in a year’s time, but 15 years down the line, and identify any systemic issues to help drive real change.”

The leadership accountability gap

One of the recurring themes in the discussion was leadership accountability and its importance in such a male-dominated sector, where attitudes toward diversity can vary widely. One audience member highlighted the resistance she has encountered:

She said: “I can feel the eye-rolls when I bring up DEI. The challenge isn’t just about creating policies, it’s about shifting mindsets so people understand that inclusion benefits everyone - not just underrepresented groups.”

Harrison highlighted the importance of leadership buy-in for data collection.

He said: “Leadership support for data collection is crucial. Companies must use clear internal messaging to explain that it benefits both employees and the business, outlining why the data is collected and how it will be used. A good way of doing this is by publishing annual workforce profiles, alongside any actions taken. This provides reassurance that you are collecting the data for the right reasons and that they can see where progress is happening.”

Brook emphasised that leaders must take ownership of inclusion efforts, adding: “Every director should be accountable for at least one action on the company’s DEI roadmap. This isn’t just an HR issue - it’s a business issue. If leaders aren’t engaged, nothing changes.”

Is DEI the answer?

While DEI alone won’t solve the skills crisis, it’s clear that without it the industry will struggle to attract and retain the diverse talent it needs to survive. And there is no doubt that the processes

that come with robust DEI strategies can certainly support efforts to undo structural issues that prevent people from entering, progressing, and staying in the industry.

As Harrison pointed out, “This is not just a construction issue - it’s a societal challenge.” Solving the skills crisis requires businesses to embrace long-term, systemic change, rather than quick fixes. By embedding DEI into recruitment, retention, and workplace culture strategies, companies can create an environment where talent thrives - ultimately strengthening the entire sector.

The skills crisis demands urgent action. DEI isn’t just a moral imperative; it’s a business necessity.