

Skanska has seen an increase in the number of female employees joining the company

Embracing diversity

Simon White, operations director for Skanska, talks about the importance of diversity and inclusion and how Skanska is driving this as a main focus area



The business benefits of an open and embedded culture of diversity and inclusion are often overlooked and are there to be grasped. In fact, I think the more the highways sector can truly embrace diversity and inclusion, the better we will overcome some of the biggest challenges we face, which are skills shortages, public perception of our sector and winning more work.

If we become more diverse we are more innovative because we recruit a cross-section of people from different backgrounds and with a variety of experience. This will push the boundaries of how we think and operate. A diverse team is to be celebrated – it creates greater self-challenge and more success and we can offer better solutions and be more competitive.

From experience, I have noticed the public sector is often more diverse than the private sector – businesses seem more open and open to diversity issues. And, increasingly, they are demanding the same of their supply chain.

Our end customers – the road users and communities we serve – are widely diverse, even across small geographic footprints. The more diverse we are as a business, the more we are in tune with the community around us. We can empathise, engage and communicate better, so we will be understood and we can build up positive relationships.

The skills gap is arguably the biggest challenge facing our sector and has been caused by successive economic downturns and people choosing other career paths. Too often we recruit from the same pool – consciously because of preconceived ideas or even with unconscious bias – recruiting people that are like ourselves or our colleagues. These preconceptions often stifle our recruitment and mean we overlook some brilliant people.

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Simon White

Inclusion

So what can we do differently and how do we become more inclusive? There are in fact some brilliant examples across our sector – organisations and people embracing this, with some great results. We just need to do more of it.

A key difference is using the principle when recruiting of ‘what can a person do?’, rather than ‘what can a person not do?’ For example, when recruiting people with disabilities, we need to break down the barriers by making adjustments to the role or workplace.

It’s also about fostering a truly inclusive culture that attracts and retains a diverse workforce. It doesn’t happen overnight, but is developed through strong leadership, education and some proactive initiatives. At Skanska we actively seek to improve our gender balance through programmes such as mixed-pair mentoring which has resulted in 70 per cent of the female participants in this programme being promoted. It has also contributed to an increase in our female employees joining the company, now at 29 per cent across the UK, and 33 per cent for new recruits.

We have created a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender network across the UK and, working in partnership with 12 other construction and engineering companies, we are sponsoring Pride in London 2016 – both helping to raise wider gender and sexual orientation awareness in our business.

A really important point is that we must be diverse in the way we understand diversity. This is looking beyond the issues that usually spring to mind, such as race, age and gender.

Background is equally important and often massively overlooked. At Skanska we are looking to give more people better opportunities. In our highways sector we have taken on 12 ex-offenders in the last year – helping re-habilitate those on pre-release programmes and those already released. The programme has been proven to reduce reoffending and creates high levels of commitment and loyalty to the employer from ex-offenders.

Across the UK we are working with the CITB, helping to encourage young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds into the highways sector. This year we have taken seven people on NEET (not in education or employment) internships on projects and contracts in and around more disadvantaged communities. Following a four-week experience period, gaining a CSCS card on route, the interns then work for us on a 13-week paid internship paving the way for future employment.

Working with the military has also been a great opportunity for Skanska. We have helped create award-winning support and infrastructure to help transition ex-services personnel into the private sector. We have provided an internal military network, targeted mentoring and even support for PTSD.

So, with a little diverse thinking when it comes to the people agenda, we can become more competitive and better perceived by clients, by society and by potential recruits. Through a little more diverse thinking and open discussion the highways sector can lead from the front and set a great example to the wider construction industry. Simply put, diversity makes great business sense. ➔