

# Delivering diversity

There is evidence that diverse and inclusive organisations will outperform the market and make better decisions, but it's not easy to create them. **Rupert Cornford** finds out what companies have been doing to help them develop

In the UK, there is a shortage of women taking STEM subjects at school and studying to become engineers. While this won't be a surprise to many people, the fact remains that ongoing efforts to improve the situation are working with some tough statistics.

According to research from Engineering UK in 2018, 50 per cent of children choosing physics at GCSE are female, which drops to 22 per cent for A-level and even lower for further and higher education entry. Just 16 per cent of engineering and technology undergraduates are female, and only 8 per cent take up apprenticeships.

This is the reality for businesses that need engineering skills and is reflected in the workforce of utility giant Electricity North West. Figures released in April, in its gender pay gap reporting, show a business actively working to improve gender diversity in the context of a tough macro environment. The number of women across the business is now 25 per cent, and climbing slowly, but the proportion of female engineers is a single-digit story.

"This issue has come to light more with gender pay gap reporting," says head of HR Rachael Parr. "When we compare ourselves to the UK average, we can pat ourselves on the back when it comes to other energy and utility companies, but I'd like it to be an awful lot better. It isn't as simple as turning a tap on and asking our recruitment team to find more female engineers, however, because they'll look at me and ask: 'where are those people going to come from?'"

Parr and her colleagues did a piece of work three years ago on the purpose and principles of the business, which opened people's minds about what they could do better. The plan was to bring diversity to life through serving the communities in which the business works and focusing on gender and ethnic diversity as a starting point.



The answer has come, in part, from focused awareness and recruitment into Electricity North West's apprentice programme this year. While the business has been visiting schools for the past three years promoting STEM subjects, taking its offer to jobs fairs across the region is new.

"Where can we get people to apply for those jobs? Ordinarily, we might just put an advert out, but that's not getting to the hard-to-reach people we are targeting," she says. "We are visiting schools, and girls' schools, in the patch we are working in. We have to be quite structured to make sure people are coming to our door."

Parr believes the business can be attractive to women and people from different ethnic backgrounds. While traditional perceptions of the sector might struggle to compete with a tech firm in the centre of Manchester, its wider focus on being a leader in the low carbon economy is beneficial.

"We are finding that people from diverse backgrounds are interested to work with us for that reason, breaking that mould of

being stuffy and traditional. We are doing a lot of work with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and Mayor Andy Burnham, which helps with our employer value proposition.

"Why would a young person want to work with us? It's not because they want to dig a hole or lay a cable; it's because they understand they're part of the wider story. We used to say we keep the lights on, now we say we keep their mobile phones on, too."

## Changing tech (and travel)

Technology consultancy ThoughtWorks has a big ambition. In an industry where females are fiercely underrepresented, it wants 40 per cent of technical staff to be women or non-binary, according to head of diversity and inclusion, Amy Lynch. Ever since the business was founded in a Chicago basement 25 years ago, equality and social impact has been on an agenda that is moving quickly.

"Technology has a lot of challenges with diversity," she says, "and it has been a

focus for us to increase the representation of women. But that has evolved and in the past two to three years, we have begun to think about gender on a spectrum. There are a growing number of people who don't identify as either a man or a woman."

Lynch heads up diversity for 450 people in the UK business and has been focusing efforts in different ways. She paints a picture of a business with a flat structure where many people get involved with interviewing candidates and giving feedback. The business also tests recruits' openness to social and economic justice to see if they will fit into the organisation.

She's also set up ten working groups on "all areas" of diversity and inclusion. Each member of the leadership team gets involved with an area they don't identify with, or have little experience of, to aid the process of listening, learning and understanding.

"Diversity and inclusion are deeply uncomfortable for most people, so it's about

getting people comfortable with being uncomfortable," says Lynch. "Looking in the mirror and acknowledging our own biases, and then thinking differently about something, is hard."

Like Lynch, Beckie Taylor, founder of Tech Returners, adds: "We can do a lot of things around building that pipeline but if we get [women] into companies that aren't

aware around diversity and inclusion, and haven't got their culture right, they fall back out."

It's quite simple: if cultures aren't set up to be inclusive, people won't stay. "In September, we will be holding round table workshops on these topics, to help businesses come together. Are those companies ready to have a more diverse workforce?"

"I am hoping a lot more will come forward, because I think it all starts with them," adds Taylor.

"They need to be aware of themselves and their acceptance to change. Many chief executives and chief technology



Beckie Taylor,  
Tech Returners



Jane Harrington,  
Clarity Business Travel

## TAKEAWAY TIPS

### DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

Business psychologist Clare Mulligan shares her tips on delivering diversity



**Look for triggers:** You might see barriers to progress, or feedback that voices aren't being heard.

A tender might ask about your diversity and inclusion strategy, or your gender pay gap figures make uncomfortable reading.

**Look at your sector:** Even the most gender aware organisation in the world will struggle if the industry recruitment pool is 70/30 men and women. Manufacturers will have different challenges to technology companies; some will be focused on gender and disability; some on cognitive diversity and other areas.

**Take the temperature:** Understand what awareness exists. Take an audit of what people are saying, run focus groups, observe meetings.

**Come up with a strategy:** What will you do and when? Take positive actions, explain and measure them. Get people involved and keep learning. Diversity forums, focus groups, mentoring and ally programmes will help. Keep up to date with trends in the outside world – they might be moving faster than you are.

**Measure the changes:** Look at data through a diversity lens. Productivity stats, engagement surveys and the number of people joining and leaving can show us biases we are not aware of.

**Become inclusive:** An organisation has to be inclusive for diversity to work. Our biases and groupthink will get in the way, so be open to being challenged. It's important to create a culture where people allow themselves to be persuaded of another point of view.

officers want to be more diverse and you can tell they are not ready to let go."

Technology has played an important role for Clarity Business Travel, helping employ more women, before and after having children, and attracting the right language skills.

"Previously, you just had to sit in an office and work for a client, but the client doesn't know where you are, and it isn't that important," says HR director Jane Harrington. "We struggled to recruit Dutch business travel consultants, so we have actually got a Dutch speaker who sits in our Warrington office."

"The travel industry has always been quite full-time, but we have done a lot of work to offer part-time roles, and shifts, so we can attract more women into the workforce."

"They are enthusiastic, committed and they don't often get a chance. Many go on maternity leave and find it hard to get back into the business." ■