

## A different view

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### **Heather Rabbatts talks to Barney Hatt about the benefits of embracing diversity and inclusion**

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**Barney Hatt: RICS is trying to grow its membership: 50% are aged over 50 and only 13% are female. How should the organisation go about doing this?**

Heather Rabbatts: For any organisation, its survival and future growth depends on the talent it embraces. As a membership body, you need to be reaching out to all of the younger people coming into the industry? both men and women? and demonstrating how you will support their ongoing professional development.

**What steps need to be taken to attract new members from more diverse backgrounds?**

There are a variety of ways, such as offering members an insight into the sector, showing them how they can progress in their careers and ensuring that this is done by a diverse mix of male and female speakers. RICS is a global body, so having people talk about their experiences working in other countries is one way. If you take a step back and think globally, the organisation is probably much more diverse than you see it.

It is partly about trying to make these connections. Whether it is what your website looks like, when you gather your members together, and who you have sitting on your boards. It is about ensuring that they are people with the experiences and backgrounds to take your strategy forward, so you get a real 360° view of the world in which your sector is operating.

**Do you think, for example, there could be a danger in always relying on the same names to make presentations at RICS conferences?**

In any sector, one reaches for the usual suspects; it is important to use the leading lights. But I do think having other voices is important. I was talking recently to some heads of FTSE companies about the diversity of thought, and we all recognised that bringing in people from other sectors and drawing on different sets of experiences and skills really adds value to board conversations.

I have spoken at conferences in sectors with which I have no involvement, but there is always transferability of knowledge. I think the best conferences get people to step back from their day jobs and look at the world slightly differently.

One of the reasons is that there are usually some things in the culture that need to change. Good boards bring experiences from other sectors to bear on those problems. These are universal issues we are all trying to address: how do you manage change, how you deal with

uncertain environments and uncertain futures?

People's careers look very different to 20 years ago when many progressed at single organisations. Now people are moving and forming their own companies. All of these issues are challenges and relevance is hugely important for bodies such as RICS.

*Research in the US and UK shows that where boards have diversity of thought as well as race and gender, businesses have performed better*

I was on the board of [Crossrail](#) for six years. I chaired auditing and risk assessment of huge engineering and construction challenges. We were working with incredible engineers, as well as construction companies, but I believe that I added significantly to the deliberations on how the project was seen strategically.

If you want to drive up membership and reach out to younger people and those from different backgrounds, then leadership needs to come from the most senior level of an organisation. Your senior executives and boards need to be reflective of where you want to drive the organisation, because those voices around the table will have ideas about how best to do that. The reason to organise diversity conferences, [as RICS does](#), is to take insights from those conversations and see how you can implement them in your own organisation.

### **What can be done to attract and retain talented professionals, regardless of their social background, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, disability or gender?**

It is about how you reach out to people. When they visit your website, do they think it relates to them? Do they see images of people doing different things that speak to their range of skills? How do you ensure relevance across all your communications so that people think 'I would like to go to that workshop' or 'I would like to go to that conference', for example?

How do you get people to network, and how do you bring in external speakers so that people think 'Oh, I hadn't thought of that'? The answer is ensuring the organisation has a real sense of purpose and is also bringing on members for the future. You need that fresh blood coming through consistently.

### **What are the business benefits of diversity and inclusion policies?**

Increasingly, research being carried out in the US and UK shows that where boards have diversity of thought as well as race and gender, businesses have performed better in terms of their profitability and return of shareholder value. This body of evidence is growing all the time. In a globalised business, if you ignore 50% of the population in terms of talent and are drawing from a very narrow cultural range, you are not going to make the best business decisions.

My experience with RICS members at Crossrail was that a number had worked in Hong Kong and Singapore, for example. Big infrastructure projects by their very nature are international, and being involved in those is crucial as you are building your career.

Ensuring that international knowledge gets embedded in the organisation is key. It is also a great asset in terms of the inclusion agenda because people are working in different cultures with people from different backgrounds.

So hearing those different voices in your conferences or your professional development courses is a very rich source of insight. Ideally, having one speaker who is able to talk about what is happening to the industry globally from personal experience would be really valuable.

Heather Rabbatts CBE began her career as a barrister before becoming a senior executive across a number of sectors including government, media and sport. She is currently Managing Director at [Smuggler Entertainment](#), a director at the [Football Association](#), and a member of the [Royal Opera House](#) Board of Trustees

**Barney Hatt is Editor of [Building Surveying Journal](#)**

### **Further information**

- Related competencies include [Conduct rules, ethics and professional practice](#), [Business planning](#)
- This feature is taken from the RICS *Building Surveying Journal* December 2015/January 2016