![APM logo] **APM** Association for Project Management

Because when projects succeed, society benefits

Women In Projects:

Levelling the Playing Field

Foreword

By **Sue Kershaw,** President, APM

APM has a proven record of championing Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEI&B) in the project profession, and we have long advocated better use of the breadth of talent available. The importance of project and programme management today only increases this need. Making sure that women can flourish in project roles is absolutely vital.

We ran an editorial campaign on issues relevant to women in our profession, inviting them to share their views, experiences and hopes for the future. The aims were twofold. We wanted to celebrate women working in projects and the difference their roles make to society. And we wanted to highlight issues that women are concerned about and explore ways to drive positive change so we create a more level playing field for everyone.

As part of our campaign, we curated a panel of female experts from across the project profession to discuss flexible working, career progression, gender parity, perceptions around discrimination and more. The discussion was as revelatory as it was fascinating, and I would like to thank every one of the guests who took part.

Sue Kershaw
President, APM

The expert panel included:

Sue Kershaw, APM President and Managing Director for Transportation at Costain (Chair).

Jenn Harris, Programme Manager, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA).

Jenny McLaughlin, Project Manager, Heathrow.

Jo Roberts, Head of Strategy, High Speed Rail Group, Department for Transport.

Karina Singh, Director of Function, Profession and Standards at the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA).

Gender diversity in the project profession

An overview

Gender equality in project management has made undeniable progress. More women are entering the profession, many hold senior positions previously unavailable to them, and companies are publicly championing the benefits of diversity and inclusion at every level. But the pace of change is slow. Despite some positive developments, our experts agreed that much more needs to be done.

Most project practitioners are still men. According to APM surveys, there is an approximate 70% male / 30% female gender split across the project profession in the UK. Some sectors are especially skewed, with females making up only 12.5% of construction industry project professionals[1], a figure that has hardly changed in three decades, said panel member Jenn Harris.

An APM survey exploring the main barriers to women entering project management as a career showed that of the female respondents, a third (33.4%) said that unequal pay is the main barrier preventing more women entering the profession, followed by gender stereotyping (32.5%) and not enough women having taken STEM subjects while studying at school, college or university (29%).

Pay and promotion disparities between men and women make for stark reading. **The gender pay gap within project management currently stands at 24%, based on the latest APM data[2], with the proportion of women earning above-average salaries actually falling to 20% from 24% in 2021** (the average salary for a project professional stands at £47,500).

This is because 79% of junior roles such as 'Project Coordinator', 'Project Administrator', or 'Programme Office Support' are filled by women, while the majority of senior positions (70%), like 'Consultant', 'Project Director' or 'PMO Director', are taken by men.

In 2023, however, the number of women in senior roles is up. Almost a third of UK consultants are now female, while the number of female 'Heads Of' (Head of Projects, Head of Programmes) and senior project managers is also on the rise.

It's also worth noting that, ethically at least, most companies are on the right path. An APM survey of 1,000 project professionals revealed that 77% of respondents think their organisation values gender equality 'somewhat highly' or 'very highly', which is encouraging. But there's still an obvious discrepancy between a company's values and the everyday reality. Underlying systemic issues remain.

Why does this matter? Aside from the obvious benefits of a more inclusive world, the business case for diversity is stronger than ever. Companies in the top quartile of gender diversity were 25% more likely to have above-average profitability than companies in the bottom quartile, said our panellists, citing McKinsey[3] as well as other DEI&B statistics. Additionally, studies by the Boston Consulting Group[4] recently found that diversity significantly increases businesses' bottom lines due to overall improved innovation, problem-solving, customer service and reputation.

So, what are the hidden inequalities? What barriers still need to be broken down? And how do we do that? Our panel of experts took the time to consider these questions based on their own experiences as women working in project management.

[1] https://www.gmb.org.uk/news/construction-industry-just-125-women-and-54-bame

[2] APM Salary and Market Trends Survey 2023
https://www.apm.org.uk/project-management-salary-survey/

[3] https://www.mckinsey.com/

[4] https://www.bcg.com/publications/2018/how-diverse-leadership-teams-boost-innovation

Prevailing cultural and social barriers

The 'leaky pipeline'

The panel agreed that there were still barriers to women advancing to the highest levels of the profession. For example, the majority of women in construction and engineering leave within five years of joining, according to the Smith Institute, a public policy think tank. Likewise, other sectors face a comparable situation, and the inevitable consequence is a lack of women rising to the top.

DEFRA's Jenn Harris noticed this 'leaky pipeline' when she began her career in construction. She said she was surrounded by young, ambitious women who had completed apprenticeships and come in as trainees. But there were very few women in senior positions and almost no women directors.

"Clearly, the profession was leaking female talent,' Jenn said. "I began to look at the barriers for women entering, but also to them progressing and remaining."

Her review of gender disparity in the workplace, which became her master's dissertation, examined the differences in self-perception between men and women in construction. Her findings confirmed that the women surveyed tended to follow more 'zig-zag' career development paths, and that 'global self-worth' (professional self-esteem or self-confidence) of women over the age of 40 is the lowest among all ages, while men's remained relatively constant throughout their lives.

Whether this is because of caregiving responsibilities, career plateau, burnout, or other reasons, the fact remains that many women tend to leave the industry before their male counterparts.

Role models required

In the past, the lack of women in leadership roles has made other women question whether project management was a viable career path. Indeed, Jenn said a key problem for her at the start of her working life was that, "few people in senior positions looked or acted like me, and everyone seemed to have the same style of leadership."

Jenn overcame this by building a network of like-minded individuals, both women and men, who helped support her career progression. But she admitted that without this network to provide inspiration, guidance, and mentorship, it would have been hard for her to achieve long-term success.

Indeed, it has been reported[5] that women feel isolated or excluded if they're the only female on a project team or in a leadership environment. This can lead to feelings of discomfort or alienation, which impacts job satisfaction.

This is one of the reasons why, in 2022, APM launched a mentoring programme to support people at different stages of their careers. APM's programme provides a secure online space for its members to form professional relationships, exchange knowledge and experiences, learn new skills and provide guidance to those who need it.

Since it launched, APM's programme has successfully signed up 274 mentors and established over 243 mentor/mentee partnerships, sharing information and expertise across the project profession. Available for APM paying members and Honorary Fellows based anywhere in the world, the programme also has reverse mentoring as an option, whereby younger project professionals can mentor more senior professionals on new practices and emerging trends.

[5] https://wiw-report.s3.amazonaws.com/Women_in_the_Workplace_2022.pdf

Gender care gap

At present, women are nearly three times more likely to take time off work to look after children than men. And 74% of women are the main carer for children, taking long periods off work to look after family, compared with just 26% of men, according to AIG Life. Furthermore, 76% of women believe they will be the main carer for an elderly relative.

It's well known that caring for children and relatives can hinder career advancement. And women are more likely to face biases and stereotypes related to their caregiving responsibilities than men. For instance, they may be perceived as being less committed to their jobs or less capable of handling demanding projects. This can lead to discrimination in hiring and promotion, as well as lower pay and fewer opportunities, a problem discussed by panellist Jo Roberts, who now makes a point of supporting anyone taking maternity leave.

"I struggled when I came back from maternity leave," Jo said. "I don't want anyone to have to go through the blind panic and low self-confidence that I did."

Moreover, Karina Singh said some supervisors assume women aren't as serious about their jobs after having children. In her case, she applied for a promotion shortly after returning from maternity leave, which surprised her superiors but equally reaffirmed her commitment to her career.

"You have to be thoughtful about how people are perceiving you and then try to break those perceptions in a constructive way," Karina said at the roundtable.

Safety first

Worksite safety (or lack thereof) also remains an issue. Depending on the type of projects being managed, project professionals often need to work in hazardous environments. Women still face additional risks due to ill-fitting personal protective equipment (PPE) much of which has been designed chiefly to protect men.

This is something Jenny McLaughlin said she had experienced in the past. She pointed to an incident on a construction site when she didn't feel safe but, at the same time, was reluctant to say anything to her male colleagues.

> "
> It made me wonder how many others on sites aren't speaking out for fear of the stigma of being cast as 'other' or 'unable'," she said. "We aren't necessarily designing safety procedures for everyone and that's one reason why retention is so hard.

Some worksites also still lack basic facilities such as female or accessible restrooms and changing areas, making it difficult to work comfortably and safely. The panel acknowledged that it is vital for employers and project managers to be aware of these concerns and take steps to mitigate them.
"We [the project profession] need to design for everybody", said Jenny. "And if women don't have a sense of psychological or physical safety, they're just not going to stay within the industry."
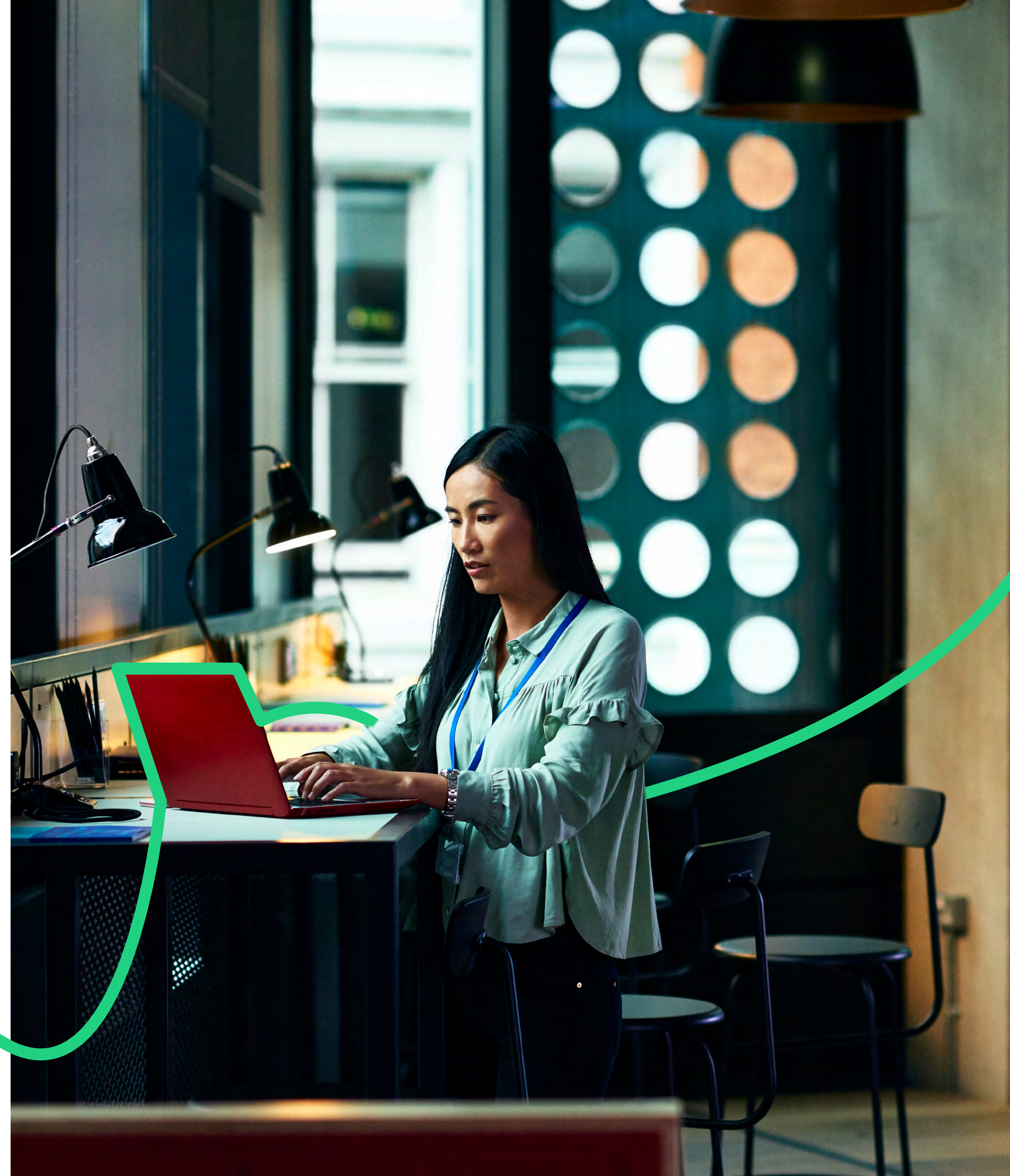
What progress is being made?

Fortunately, we are seeing a steady trend towards greater gender equality across the project profession. Changes in workplace culture, diversity and inclusion programmes, gender-neutral hiring and evolving leadership styles have created a more supportive environment for women. The landscape is moving alongside wider societal changes, reflecting groundbreaking shifts in attitudes, and our panel outlined some developments that are paving the way for a better, brighter future.

Flexibility and work-life balance

Rising from the ashes of the pandemic, flexible hours, remote working, the four-day week and job sharing have helped overcome barriers that disproportionately affected women. For instance, caregivers are now better able to provide for children or elderly relatives and, as a result, more talent – across all genders – is being retained.

Jo Roberts explained how a silver lining of the COVID-19 pandemic has been that it serves as a 'leveller' among those with caring responsibilities, commenting: "People are able to balance caring and professional responsibilities much better now."

Jo also pointed to an additional shift in attitude towards part-time work. In the past, individuals who worked part-time were perhaps viewed as not as committed or capable as those who worked full-time. Jo, who worked part-time after having a child, said that now there is an understanding that "I'm still working for the other part of my time, I'm just not doing paid work. I'm still just as productive and committed to my job as a full-time worker."

Karina Singh added that companies were being forced to adapt to different ways of working to retain their employees.

> " If we say to people that we don't want them working shorter weeks or part-time hours, then we risk losing all that knowledge that we've spent years building.

she said, adding that job sharing initiatives had been a game-changer because team members no longer had work in isolation.

"[Job shares] are great because you can test your thinking in a safe space and double your capacity. You also learn so much from working with someone with a different life perspective."

Nevertheless, the traditional nine-to-five working model remains deeply ingrained among many employers. Jo Roberts said she would like to see more senior project roles offered on a part-time or job-share basis.

> " There's still a perception that you can't be part-time and be at the helm, this needs to change.

The conversation is changing

Sue Kershaw reflected on how much the gender conversation had changed from even 10 years ago. Chiefly, there's less pressure for women to conform to male expectations, which previously included communication methods, leadership style and even appearance.

"You had to dress a certain way to go to certain things," Sue said. "[Women] are much freer now and the industry is in a much better place."

Karina Singh additionally highlighted how the emphasis had shifted away from 'let's fix the women' to 'let's fix the system'. She said that, in the past, the goal was for men to teach women what they needed to do to succeed in a narrow, overtly masculine work environment. Now, thankfully, it's more of a conversation about the barriers preventing everyone from being successful.

She thinks this can be linked to a broadening definition of what makes an effective leader:

> " It's no longer about the person working nine to five with all the answers, which was the old-fashioned command and control style of leadership. It's more about someone who can bring together different teams and perspectives and solve problems.

For Karina, it's paramount that we don't replicate the old methods of working that existed when there was greater gender division. She believes the next task is to address the systemic issues that still use 'male' leadership qualities and outdated working practices as the benchmark of success.

"In project delivery, we are literally building the future," she wrote on her recent blog for APM.

> " As architects of the future, let's take the opportunity to challenge the status quo.

Diverse skill sets needed

A broad range of skills is now not only valuable but essential in project management. A need to effectively manage data-driven projects, data visualisation techniques and online platforms have opened the doors to people with digital skills as well as those from finance, marketing and design backgrounds.

Problem solving is also a big part of the day-to-day. And the panellists agreed that a candidate with a broad range of experiences that can unite people with diverse skills, can be more useful than someone with 20 years-plus experience in the same field. Because of this, people hailing from all kinds of industries are transferring into project management, which can only be a good thing, said Jenny McLaughlin, adding that it's definitely possible to acquire skills along the way.

I don't come from an engineering background," she said. "But I have gained experience because of the projects I've been on. You don't always need to be technically proficient to succeed as it's about creating the best environment for the team."

And with changes in technology and working practices, the project management profession of the future will need to prioritise different skills from those required in the past. The demands of increasingly complex projects, with new considerations and regulations, will require professionals to broaden their knowledge and abilities.

Communication skills are becoming increasingly important reflecting the industry's changing working culture. With more remote working, the ability to communicate quickly and clearly is an obvious requirement, and something that the younger generation and women particularly value.

Sue Kershaw also pointed to the importance of recruiting people based on attitude. "If they're willing to give this a go, then I'm usually willing to give them a go," she said. "This is a good way of attracting skilled people from other professions."

Karina Singh added that "you can teach people skills, but it's much harder to teach attitude," a statement with which all the roundtable panellists agreed.

"You can come into project delivery from different professions and at different points in your career," Karina said, mentioning how she previously worked in policy, corporate services and operations. "A lot of the skills people develop in other industries are very transferable and our strategy [in government] is to catch them and entice them into project delivery."

Essential steps for employers and project team leaders

Gender diversity results in better outcomes, increased creativity and more engaged and motivated teams. As outlined above, many more women are joining the project profession, but the pressure must be on organisations and the people within them to create the conditions to retain them, and for them to thrive. A multi-layered approach is required. APM therefore recommends taking the following steps.

1. Inclusivity programmes and initiatives

Diversity and inclusion training should be provided to all employees, including managers and senior leaders. This will promote understanding of unconscious bias, micro-aggressions, and other issues that can contribute to discrimination and exclusion.

At the same time, companies should implement diverse hiring practices to attract and retain employees from underrepresented groups. This can include establishing partnerships with organisations that serve diverse communities, using blind resume screening to reduce bias and establishing diversity targets for hiring.

Equally, putting in place mentorship programmes such as that offered by APM, to connect employees from underrepresented groups with experienced mentors will help with retention and foster a more collaborative workplace culture.

2. Flexibility at every stage

To ensure respect for people's differences, our panel agreed that flexibility is needed at every stage of the journey; from recruitment and performance, to retention, training and promotion. Indeed, the working environment must be agile enough so that someone's age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, race, culture, or religion, does not require asking for something different but being presented with options to thrive.

"Think of the sustainable changes we'll make if we achieve this," Jenny McLaughlin said. "We will have lived experience that creates a constructive challenge to create an equitable, safe world in which all can participate."

3. Design for everyone

Organisations should design for everyone regardless of their abilities, disabilities, age, gender, ethnicity, or any other characteristic that could leave them vulnerable to discrimination. This means creating simple and intuitive products, services, and systems that foster participation, emphasise flexibility and require low physical effort. In short, adopt the principles of inclusive design whenever possible.

Jenny McLaughlin says that to successfully achieve this, organisations must be mindful of unconscious bias, seek to understand previously unconsidered demographics and always ask questions such as who are we designing for? 'Do we know for sure they're requirements to be safe, feel they belong and thrive?

"When we say that we are 'keeping everyone safe', we have to literally mean everyone," Jenny said. "Can everyone use our facilities? Well, if we can't answer this question, it means we don't know and we need to challenge ourselves to get curious and understand what and why we don't know."

4. Showcase diversity

Seeing diversity celebrated and acknowledged has many benefits. For example, Sue Kershaw highlighted the fact that Costain Group – which has more women at board level than men – attracts female talent simply by promoting its high-ranking status as an inclusive employer on its website. The importance of visually representing female role models cannot be overstated, she said.

"People really want to see diversity," Sue added. "It is such a powerful image and it makes people think differently about what we do."

5. More transparency and accountability

Organisations must be transparent about their diversity efforts and hold themselves accountable for progress. This includes tracking and reporting on diversity metrics such as the percentage of women in leadership positions, the gender pay gap, the percentage of women in technical roles, and the percentage of women being promoted.

They must set goals for improvement. Conduct regular audits. Adapt training methods. Share their efforts with employees, stakeholders and the public. By taking these actions, organisations will demonstrate their commitment to gender diversity, create more equal opportunities and a brighter future for all.

"As project professionals, the impact of the decisions we make could last for five, ten, fifteen or even one hundred years," Karina Singh said. "We need to put ourselves in the shoes of the people we're designing for and ensure that the future is better than the present."

Essential steps for individual project professionals

Meaningful change requires a collective effort. And the responsibility falls on individual project practitioners as well as organisations to play a role in effecting change. As well as advocating for gender equality, sharing our experiences, and supporting relevant initiatives, we all have an obligation to contribute to a work environment that's free from bias and discrimination, which benefits everyone involved.

1. Stay curious/take risks

We should maintain a healthy curiosity and recognise that there is always more to learn. By staying curious, individuals can educate themselves (and their teams) by staying up-to-date on new research, best practices and emerging trends around gender diversity. Keep asking the right questions; recognise assumptions; challenge the status quo; take risks and speak up when it comes to objectivity and fairness. By continuing to learn, challenge and experiment, individuals can build a stronger and more effective working culture for the whole profession, even if it involves going out on a limb with a new diversity initiative or recruitment hire.

> "
> I have a motto which is to make a new mistake every day." "If you're not making mistakes or taking risks, you're not pushing the boundaries. Remember to be kind to yourself. Not everything is going to work.

Jenny McLaughlin added that it falls within the scope of chartered organisations, such as APM, to help individuals achieve these goals. "What I love about my work with APM is that we can show project practitioners that it's ok to take risks, even if it results in a mistake," she said. "Because mistakes can be a valuable part of the journey to success.

2. Build support networks

Support networks are crucial to overcoming challenges at work. Whenever and wherever possible, women should share their knowledge and experience with other women, providing guidance and mentorship. This will create a community, which will multiply and help many others down the line. For example, Jo Roberts always keeps an eye out for women about to go on maternity leave, even if she's not their line manager.

> "
> I encourage them to keep in touch and make sure they are aware of any changes in the department or at work while they are away," she said, adding that the parental conversation shouldn't be restricted to women. "It's vital that men role model that parental leave is for them too.

> "
> Be that ally for others. There will always be someone you can help – no matter what stage you are at in your career so reach out to them.

3. Be respectful

Treating everyone with equal respect, regardless of their gender, will help create a positive work culture. When people feel valued and respected it fosters better collaboration and enhanced teamwork, as well as improved results. In this regard, when mistakes inevitably take place, the onus is on all of us to avoid scapegoating or singling out individuals for unmerited blame.

"For me, it's always 'the team' that makes a mistake, and 'the team' that has come together to overcome, move forward and be successful," says Jenny McLaughlin. "It's not about individuals, this about all of us being the eyes and ears for the team and watching out for each other."

4. Embrace collaboration

Given the diverse skill sets of newcomers to the profession, project practitioners can draw upon their unique experiences and abilities to create a workplace that is more equitable, inclusive, and collaborative. This exchange of ideas and perspectives will, in turn, result in better problem-solving and more creative and innovative solutions. Indeed, the benefits of a well-rounded team cannot be overstated, according to our panellists.

"Our superpower is solving problems," said Karina Singh. "And bringing together different people, different skill sets, different functions, different ways of thinking is how you solve problems better,"

"What actually gets projects delivered is the person who creates that psychological safety net and makes everyone feel empowered to speak up," Karina added.

Jenn Harris also said: "We all spend a huge amount of time at work and we need to embrace the differences and the similarities around us to succeed. We are more alike than different, and we need to engage with each other more as humans."

Jo Roberts added that we should all lift as we climb, help others climb the career ladder or zigzag and make space for others as we grow and progress.

Conclusion

APM actively promotes investment in gender diversity across the profession and addresses the development and promotion of women working in project management environments. We support all project professionals to ensure they have the potential to develop a highly rewarding career and to maximise the availability of expertise in the project management profession.

We support women in projects in a number of ways including mentoring opportunities for members, a dedicated Women in Project Management Specific Interest Group and the annual Women in Project Management conference. The conference creates ideal opportunities for networking, practical insights for professionals, and women navigating project management careers into leadership roles, covering topics including work-life balance, managing your career journey, diversity in teams and transformational leadership.

For further information visit apm.org.uk

We are the only chartered membership organisation for the project profession