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Because when projects succeed, society benefits

# Diversity in project teams:

## Purpose, progress and delivery

# Introduction

Whilst the value of diversity and inclusion in the workplace is widely accepted, it struck the Wessex Regional Network team that there is not much insight into how diversity and inclusion features when setting up project teams.

By bringing together a range of representatives from our Corporate Partners across the region, we attempted to capture some valuable insights to how purposeful diversity and inclusion features within project teams, if at all.

The conversation was engaging, enlightening and educational and I hope that you find the content of this paper to be the same.  We look forward to revisiting this topic with attendees later in 2024.

Dave Corbin ChPP FAPM
Wessex Regional Network Lead

Academic and empirical evidence shows that value is created from difference, and diverse teams can bring about higher performance. A broad spectrum of ideas, skills and perspectives drives innovation.

Diversity was identified as one of nine conditions for improving outcomes in the Association for Project Management (APM)'s Dynamic Conditions For Project Success research.

"Project management is about navigating uncertainty and complexity, qualities that diverse teams genuinely excel at. But how diverse are our teams, and what can we do to address this?" said Nicholas Dacre, University of Southampton.

To find out, the APM Wessex Branch brought together a diverse group of project professionals working in a variety of sectors for a frank and open discussion.

Quotes have been anonymised to allow participants to freely share ideas and experiences.

## Diversity vs inclusion

Diversity and inclusion are distinct concepts but work together. Without an environment which welcomes, supports and values diversity, it is harder to retain staff. Diversity strategies without inclusion risk being short-term.

"It's a two-step process, isn't it? One is avoiding the bias in your selection. And two is how you set up your team to foster that inclusive environment," was one participant's summary.

For some, the approach is the other way around, inclusion comes first, with diversity as the measure of a successful inclusion strategy.

An inclusive environment is about understanding, being open and able to learn from mistakes. It's also about understanding how to get the best from diverse teams.
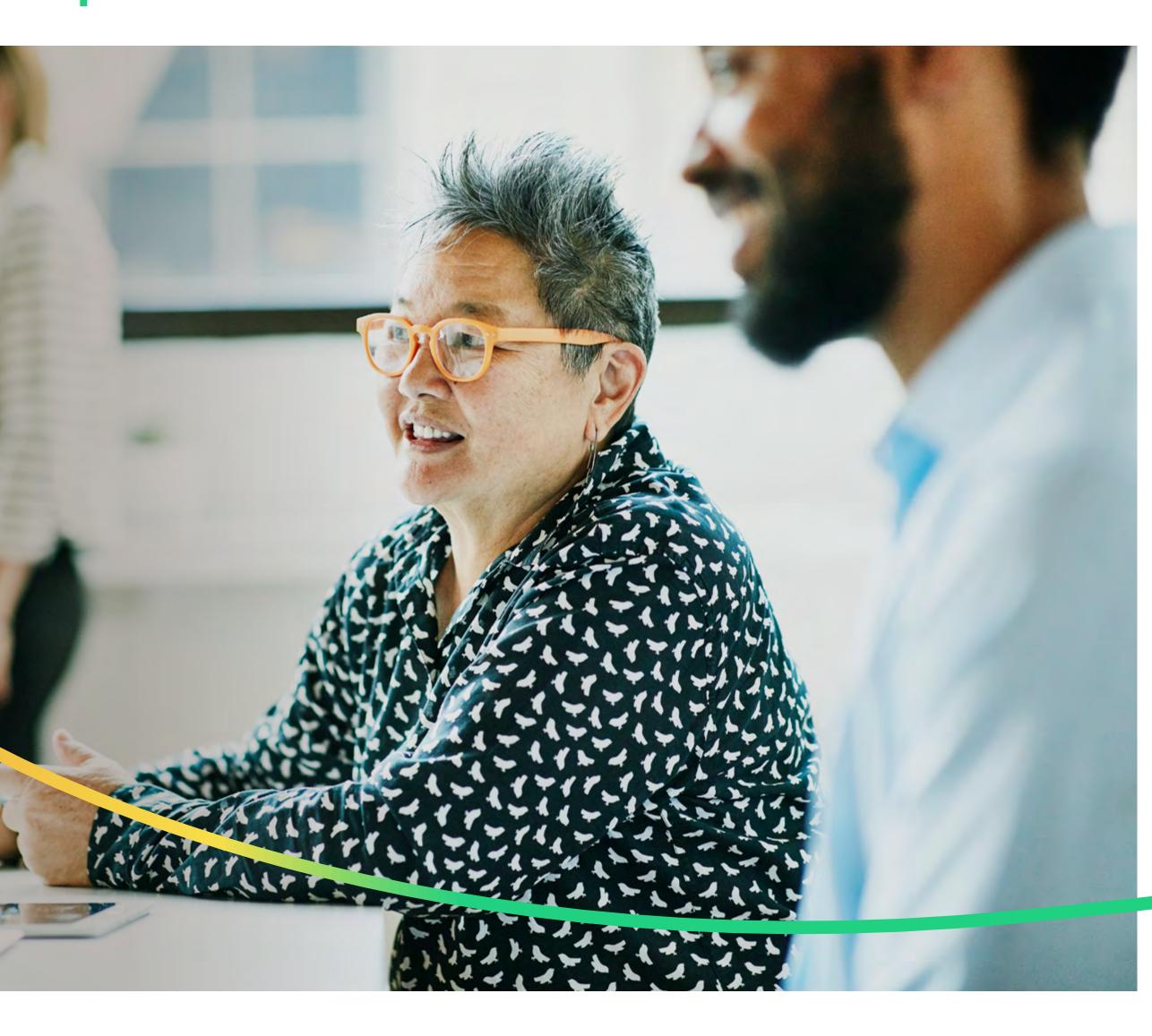
One example given was a collaborative behaviours framework, which sets out how people will work. It sets up a safe environment, with an understanding that there will be unintentional mistakes but that they can be called out without offence.

This requires good management, and project managers are in a position to support embedding an inclusive culture.

# Where are projects teams on the journey

Internal forces

At a company or organisational level, there was strong evidence of working towards diversity, but there was little evidence of purposeful diversity at a project level.

For some, diversity in project teams is dependent on company equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) policies being successfully adopted and delivering results.

"The project teams are usually formed by borrowing resources from different functions. So, it's not really the project teams that hire those individuals into the teams," was one observation.

If you are recruiting teams internally, you are dependent on having a diverse talent pool in place from which to draw. And some business sectors are further ahead with improving diversity than others.

One business has drawn up a company-wide inclusion toolkit which, while not specifically targeted at project management, will impact those teams. It sets out the terms under which business cases can be presented to the board and must include evidence of working with different minority groups.

But there were also admissions that diversity within internal project teams is an afterthought rather than purposeful. Something to foster once the 'best' person for the job has been chosen.

However, here, there is danger in how 'best' is defined. It's easy to default to who is familiar, particularly when there are time pressures.

"It's a noble aim to have the best person for the job, but being the best is subjective and subject to our biases," said one participant.

Having more than one person making decisions can help eliminate bias. But considering the part that diversity can play in successful project delivery should also be part of the thought process in pulling a team together and measured accordingly.

Recruitment policies which build a more diverse talent pool across an organisation from which to draw teams can help if the "looks like me, sounds like me" cycle is broken.

And recruitment policies need to address diversity disparity throughout businesses. The higher up an organisation you go, the less diverse it tends to get, which is problematic.

# Where are projects teams on the journey:
## External forces

External forces can also dictate purposeful diversity. Some clients have Equality, Diversity and Inclusion targets of their own and require businesses pitching for projects to demonstrate diversity within their team.

"We have to think about who makes up our project team, not only in terms of capability and qualifications but also the team needs to be diverse. Our clients are driving this agenda," the group was told.

Commitment to diversity is monitored via individual time spent working on the project throughout, so the company has to deliver "not just pay lip service".

However, for some clients, the focus might be purely on speed of delivery. Following frameworks and purposeful diversity can mean it takes longer to put a team together.

There are also some instances where clients are driven by their own biases and want familiarity with who they deal with. Project managers can play an important role in mitigating such prejudices (see *Ways of influencing change*).

## Learning from diversity

Making the right decisions for the project is critical, and diversity plays a part.

If those sitting around the table come from a similar background, there isn't diversity of thought. Having different voices asking different questions helps break the loop and delivers different and better results.

There were a variety of approaches being considered and trialled.

"What we are trying to do is get rid of unconscious bias in our team selection rather than use positive discrimination or an active inclusion scorecard," said one.

Their business has introduced a 'skills finder' with the resources team selecting people based on the skills and experiences criteria they've been given. The idea is to remove unconscious bias. "It will be interesting to see how it works," they added.
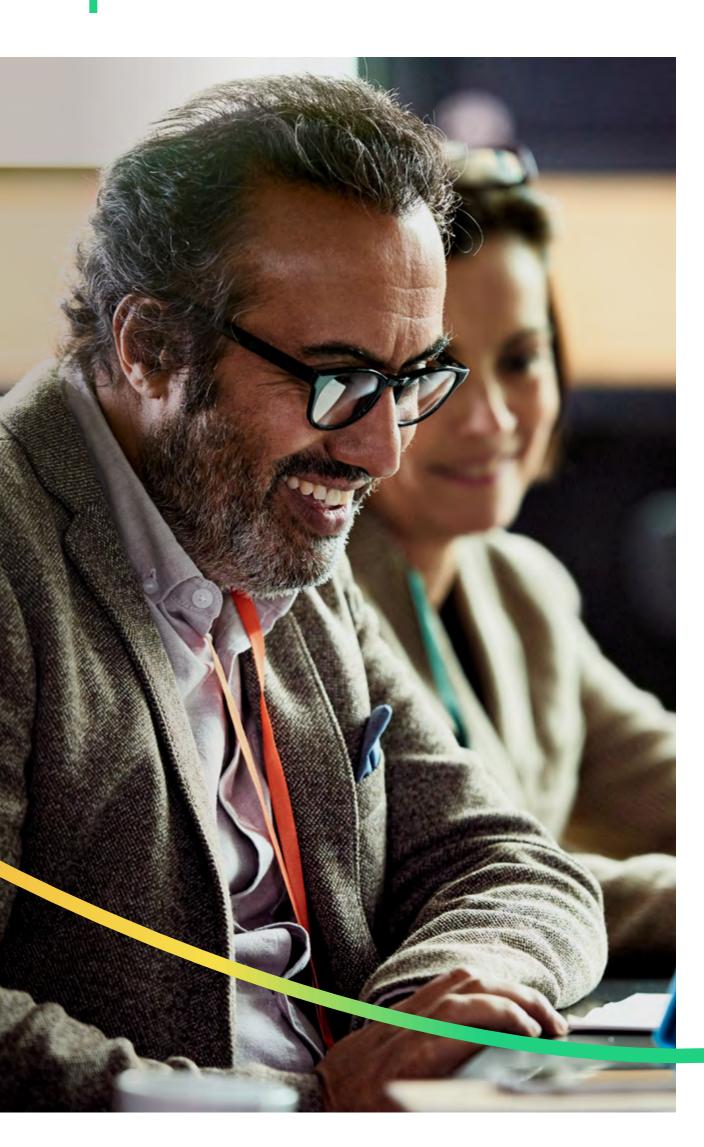
Reverse mentoring is a strategy being used to overcome barriers at the top of an organisation where there is less diversity. Senior leaders are paired with people from diverse backgrounds to share their experiences. Building that understanding changes and challenges thinking.

"Once they've understood those experiences, it enables them to have conversations at board level and bring those insights into the organisation," the group was told.

But there was also caution about ensuring that the mentoring benefits both parties and isn't one-sided.

# Ways of influencing change

Being in the majority doesn't mean you are part of the problem; it's about making decisions that enable change.

This could be pushing back if clients don't share the same values and want to default to who they know or personalities which match their own.

One example given was championing an introvert in the team who didn't fit the mould of "fist-bumping, loud and brash" in meetings that the client is used to.

"The onus is on us as project managers to help bring people on and not just rely on HR to recruit," was one comment.

It's about being deliberate in helping people develop. Identify areas where there are knowledge gaps and helping to fill them. It can be ensuring people are being mentored, taken to client meetings and introduced to people.

"We don't have to wait for the message from the top to change the culture within our organisation; we are changing the culture as we go," said one participant.

However, there was an acknowledgement that not everything can be changed in one go, and it's a gradual process which needs to be measured and reinforced by accountability.

"Test things; for the next project, try and go for something that is against our bias and then be pleasantly surprised when we get someone on the team who isn't in our likeness, performs brilliantly, and we get on very well with them," was a suggestion.

# Conclusion

As those at the discussion highlighted, diversity matters, but delivering it purposefully at a project level needs more thought and work.

Success only comes if there is buy-in and meaningful action. Sharing experiences, ideas and learnings is an important step if they lead to change and implementation.
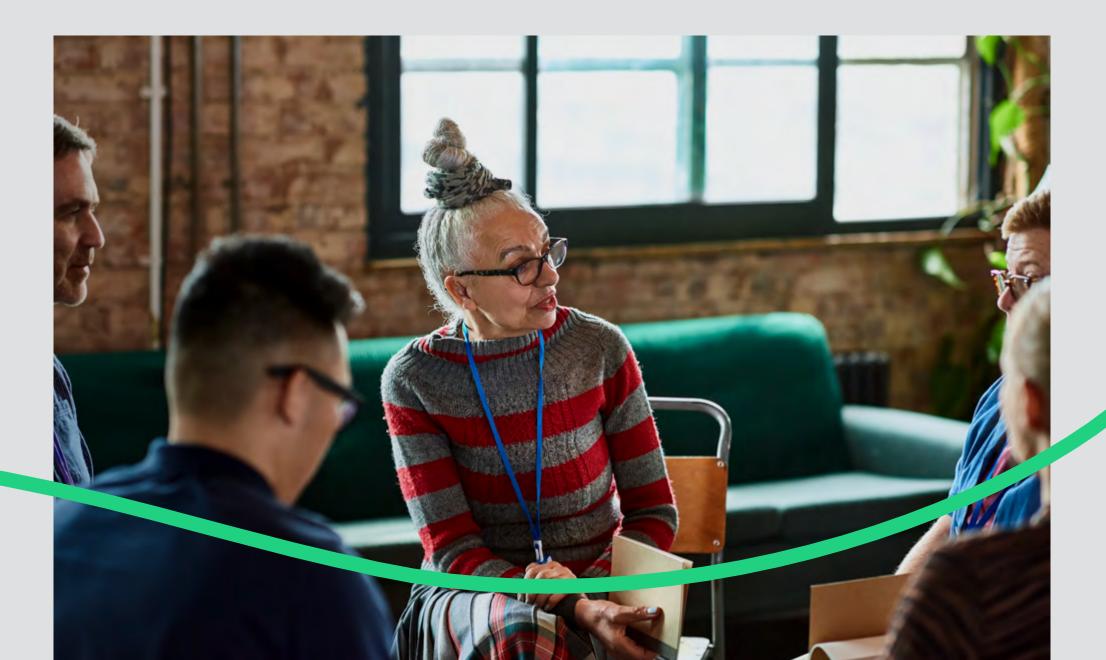
That step on the path to diversity in project teams, combined with how to measure success, is a work in progress.

The group will reconvene later in 2024 to update on progress.

What is your experience with diversity and inclusion in project teams? Let us know via **diversityandinclusion@apm.org.uk**

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Atkins Réalis
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