

# Women in Project Management:

## *What Now? What Next?*

Nobody could have missed David Cameron's recent high profile cabinet shake-up, which was relentlessly marketed as an attempt to oust the "male, pale and stale". Whatever your political persuasion, the PR message was certainly delivered thoroughly – not least via the prominent promotions of a number of female MPs to new and high profile roles. Diversity, it seems, is firmly on the political table – but when we move beyond the circles of central government what is the reality for women in the workplace now?

### The Panel:



**Manon Bradley** is the Development Director for the Major Projects Association (MPA), and is also actively involved in The Portrait Club – an informal group set up to explore the realities of diversity and gender issues in project management.



**Sarah Coleman** is a Non-Executive Director of the Association for Project Management (APM). She is a highly experienced project manager, programme manager and consultant specialising in business transformation and organisational change in the UK and internationally.



**Teri Okoro** is the chair of APM's Women in Project Management (WiPM) Specific Interest Group (SIG). She has over twenty years' experience of managing and delivering capital projects and programmes in the public, private and third sectors across construction disciplines.

Bringing the debate closer to the PM space are two statistics which will be familiar to us all. The first? Stubborn project failure rates across many project management disciplines, from IT to change initiatives. The second? PMI's recent suggestion that global businesses will need 15 million new, skilled project managers by the year 2020. The landscape for project managers is changing, so is now the time to examine whether we have genuinely tackled gender diversity in this increasingly popular career choice?

Our Editor, Amy Hatton, spoke to three key industry representatives to explore the questions. As it turns out, she discovered that the debate itself may be out of date. Tackling gender inequality in itself, it seems, is no longer enough. It's diversity as a whole that we should be thinking about, according to this distinguished panel.

## The Debate:

**PM Today:** The very fact that we're having this discussion, as well as the presence of a number of special interest groups for women in the PM sector, suggests that there is still a case to be answered for more pro-active gender equality measures. But is there actually any evidence out there that demonstrates that this is the reality?

**Coleman:** The publication of the Lord Davies Report (2011) highlighted the status of women at board level (or lack of them!), inviting organisations to benefit from greater diversity. The APM has a highly successful WiPM SIG attracting both men and women, but it's also true that we have all kinds of SIGs within APM covering a whole range of areas from people through to governance, planning, monitoring and control. Just because we have these SIGs doesn't necessarily mean that they're struggling to find an equal voice. Our WiPM SIG was established in 1993 through an

interest in promoting the development of women in the project management space, and this is still true today. I encounter women in senior positions doing some inspirational things across industry sectors. They haven't necessarily trained in project management but have significant experience in areas like IT, biosciences and engineering. What is plain here is that women are taking advantage of the opportunities presented. Yet whilst some of these are full time qualified project managers, there are still lots more who might suddenly find themselves put in charge of a project without the formal job title. So whilst they might not qualify within statistical data as a project manager they are doing the job day to day, and it's important that they're supported in that.

**Bradley:** The statistics are apparently scant at the moment, but what we do have as Sarah points out is lots of established evidence that boards with more diversity make better decisions. To my mind, if that's true of a company then it must be true of a project team. The purpose of the MPA is to enhance the performance of major projects. My concern is not to do with recruiting women for its own sake. My priority is to see major projects delivering better results, and if the evidence shows us that increasing diversity at decision making level can help us to achieve that, then I consider that to be a strategy worth attention.

**Okoro:** I think the status of women in project management probably reflects what's happening in wider society, which is that particularly at higher levels women remain under-represented. There have been some studies - mainly in the US - by bodies like Catalyst or researchers like Henderson, Stackman and Koh, who have found that women tend to stagnate at second level positions and they're not making their way into senior management. But this can vary by industry. I think it's fair to say that industries like heavy projects and construction have always tended to have poorer

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## The Diversity Landscape

According to the latest Global Diversity Ranking report by Forbes, as at the end of 2012:

- The most diverse nations in terms of overall employment (gender, age, ethnicity etc.) are Norway, New Zealand and Iceland.
- The nations with the highest proportion of female workers are Iceland (78%), Denmark (75%) and Norway (71%).
- The UK and USA remain more stagnant with a female workforce of 56% and 59% respectively.
- Healthcare, hotels and catering, and education are the most diverse occupations.
- Construction, utilities and mining score the lowest.
- C-level and senior management positions are still struggling on diversity. Out of 1.5 million chief executives in the U.S., just one-quarter are women and only one in ten are ethnic minorities.
- The lowest rates of workforces aged 65 and over are all found in European countries.

Source: *Diversity and Inclusion: Unlocking Global Potential*, Forbes 2012

Download the full report at <http://images.forbes.com/forbesinsights>



representation - on the other hand at British Airways two thirds of the project managers are women. Plus, we are seeing evidence that more and more young women are entering the profession across all sectors, which is bound to start levelling up the playing field over time.

**PM Today:** So assuming that we haven't achieved total equality yet, does that even actually matter to project management in real terms?

**Coleman:** I believe it does. In particular, although technical skills are absolutely important for the nature of our work, we're seeing a greater emphasis on the softer skills and the research tells us that those are skill sets more generally exhibited by women. It's about more diversity: bringing in and utilising different dynamics, experience and viewpoints. Interestingly, over the past two years the number of female non-executive board members at APM has risen and we now have six female members of the board: five elected and an invited female board intern. It's true that APM membership still has a ratio of 83% men to 17% women. That's quite a disparity and one that we'd like to see diminish over time. But some of the wider research is showing a general move towards at least a 70% to 30% ratio in project management, and I think what we're seeing on our own board reflects that.

**Bradley:** Even if we could demonstrate that women are not sufficiently represented, there are so many complex factors affecting the outcomes of projects that you could never allocate a lack of female presence to the question of whether the project worked. Whilst I don't agree with quotas for their own sakes, you can't help but notice the all-male panels we still tend to find at events and throughout the project management space. But at the end of the day, for me this isn't about women's issues or feminism. It's about improving project success. And if we can demonstrate that

having more women promotes success (which is logical because it's been proven in the boardroom) then why aren't we doing it?

**Okoro:** It matters if we want to be performing at the best level. We know from numerous studies that diversity of ideas generates better innovation, and there are reports showing that businesses with more senior women outperform their rivals by 42%. We also know that looking ahead we face skills shortages and we'll be competing with other industries for talent. The obvious conclusion is that if we want the project management sector to thrive we need to ensure that we're encouraging the widest pool of talent into the sector. There's lots of different evidence demonstrating that increasing diversity can help businesses to achieve more, but I think that there's also a recognition that we need to tackle diversity, recruitment and career development as a whole, rather than just looking at the questions in isolation.

**PM Today:** So what can we do to encourage that diversity of talent, particularly amongst younger women entering the sector?

**Coleman:** Get them engaged, and get them engaged early! The environment is very different to when I started out thirty years ago in ICT. Back then you would tend to go into a particular functional area and when you got to a certain stage you had the opportunity to progress into project management. At that time project management qualifications were quite unusual but now there's so much more opportunity out there. There's a lot more awareness and recognition around project management as a skill and a function and how it can help to move organisations towards where they want to go. It's no longer just about construction and heavy industry. We're seeing a bigger take-up in pharmaceuticals, IT, technology, major events planning and healthcare. But because more junior staff members

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## Diversity and Retention

According to a recently launched report by recruitment specialists Arras People:

- Just 28% of surveyed project managers said they are happy in their current jobs.
- 67% of project managers are actively looking for a new job.
- 55% of project managers seeking a new position report that “finding opportunities that align with their skills and experience” is their greatest challenge.
- 46% of those seeking new posts believe that the “remuneration levels on offer are too low”.
- 75% of working projects managers have not received a pay rise above the rate of inflation this year (93% of project managers working in the public sector).
- 74% of private sector respondents anticipate some level of growth in their current organisation during 2014.
- 55% of respondent involved in recruiting programme and project managers in 2014 reported that filling roles has been difficult due to a lack of suitable applicants and restrictions on available remuneration.

Source: *Project Management Confidence Index, Arras People, July 2014.*

Download the full report at [www.arraspeople.co.uk](http://www.arraspeople.co.uk)

are not always given formal project management titles, it can skew the issue and their presence can become a little lost, leading them to miss out on those formal career development opportunities.

**Okoro:** We’ve just closed a survey which was open to men and women – however mainly women replied. The number one issue, put forward by 60% of respondents, was that career progression was still an issue for them. That might suggest why, although we’re seeing more young women entering the arena, their middle management careers still seem to stall at the higher level. It’s important for businesses to invest in specific initiatives to eliminate unintended barriers and ensure that people have similar opportunities to move up the career ladder. If you don’t invest in your people the chances are that they will leave, but benefits of retaining good talent are enormous.

**Bradley:** It’s partly around changing the narrative in project management. Particularly in major projects there can still be a notion of the project manager or project director as being a hero that parachutes in and “rescues” the project. We need a narrative that centres more on avoiding failure in the first place, rather than troubleshooting and solving problems retrospectively and in a big way. It’s a quieter story but it’s a better story. In the same vein, I think that we should consider whether we could view our major projects in a different way and apply a different approach to them. Is a seventy hour week a pre-requisite of running a major project? If that’s true then that’s a tough career call that each individual has to make. But if it’s not true then we’re creating a fiction that it’s only by giving up your life that you can be successful in this arena. Actually, all of the evidence suggests that achieving work life balance improves productivity. Maybe we need to change the culture so that hard work and smart work aren’t seen as the same thing. It all contributes towards the picture

of what a successful leader should be, and that picture at the moment isn’t necessarily helpful.

**Okoro:** Diversity has got to be very much a top-down and not just a bottom-up issue. Business leaders have to come out and say that this is a core issue they want to address and it’s everyone’s responsibility. It needs to be given importance, appraised as part of people’s performance, and embedded within the culture. It has to be formally embraced and not just treated in isolation.

**Coleman:** I think that women need to find their voice and become more visible. Organisations are increasingly providing transparency around promotion and job opportunities. They are also increasingly giving the individual the responsibility to manage their own development and plot their own career. There’s a difference between getting in at entry level and choosing to go up to the very senior level. For me, the real question is: are we prepared to step up to the mark, and to identify and ask for the support we need to do this rather than hang back? This might not suit you now but lives, priorities and ambitions change. So if not now, when?

### Find out more:

Find more information about APM’s WiPM SIG and other groups at [www.apm.org.uk/groups](http://www.apm.org.uk/groups)

Explore the work of the MPA and its activities, including The Portrait Club, by visiting [www.majorprojects.org](http://www.majorprojects.org)

Get information about the 2014 National Conference & 21st Anniversary of Women in Project Management, taking place on the 25th September 2014, via APM’s website: [www.apm.org.uk/events](http://www.apm.org.uk/events)



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