

24 August

[Specialism] Building surveying

[Topic] Diversity and inclusion

[Headline] How to retain women in building surveying

[Standfirst] Why do women leave the discipline – and how can we offer them more secure and rewarding positions to improve retention?

[Authors] Dr Samantha Organ MRICS and Jo Williams MRICS

[SEO] Gender, diversity, women, skills, talent, recruitment, retention

In his foreword to *The chartered surveyor: his training and his work* in 1932, Winston Churchill hoped that a continuous flow of people would be attracted to the career: 'One cannot easily think of a more agreeable profession for a young civilian.'

https://rics.koha-ptfs.co.uk/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=96866&shelfbrowse_itemnumber=102603

Although the original title may imply that there were only male surveyors, the first woman to qualify – Irene Barclay – did so in 1922, <https://www.rics.org/news-insights/the-first-woman-chartered-surveyor-irene-barclay> a decade earlier. Today, 18% of RICS chartered surveyors are female. <https://www.rics.org/about-rics/responsible-business/diversity-and-inclusion/improving-representation-of-women-in-property-and-construction>

Despite Churchill's positive comments about the profession, though, we are almost a century later facing a widely recognised skills shortage. Eunomia's 2021 Building skills for net zero report, for the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB), identified surveying as critically constrained and in need of major investment.

<https://www.eunomia.co.uk/report-category/construction/>

With the average age of qualified surveyors being 55,

<https://www.geospatialuk.org/post/young-surveyors-are-on-the-rise> the profession's skills shortage is likely to be exacerbated over the next decade unless sufficient talent enters and progresses.

[Subhead]Women deterred despite diversity drive

Although the surveying profession has recognised the benefits of inclusive and diverse teams, the proportion of female building surveyors remains much lower than in surveying overall.

Related article

[Boosting building surveying's appeal for women | Journals | RICS](#)

<https://ww3.rics.org/uk/en/journals/built-environment-journal/boosting-building-surveying-s-appeal-for-women.html>

Recent research by Sinéad Clarkson, Lucy Hind and Sambo Lyson Zulu has emphasised that, across all sectors, European women are more likely than men to contribute greater time to domestic tasks outside their day job. Although this is based on older research by McKinsey, <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and->

organizational-performance/our-insights/gender-diversity-a-corporate-performance-driver, it may be one potential factor affecting the proportion of women in surveying.

<https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/9508/>

[Sub-head] Alternative pathways preferred to building surveying

Our focus, however, has been on their experiences of working as building surveyors. We spoke to a number of such professionals to understand some of their experiences. While not statistically significant or generalisable, these discussions may provide some anecdotal insights and useful reflections.

[Pull-out quote] 'Some female building surveyors don't leave surveying but make the transition to other pathways'

One of these professionals was Sarah. She works as a senior building surveyor, and wanted to emphasise: 'The vast majority of my experiences are positive, and I really love my job.' So why is there a smaller proportion of female building surveyors than there are women in other surveying disciplines?

We know one reason is that some female building surveyors don't leave surveying, but make the transition to other pathways such as project management. Alice, for instance, is a chartered building surveyor who now works as a senior project manager.

She explained: 'I found project management paid better money than a role as a senior building surveyor. ... [My] technical training in building surveying has been immensely advantageous when employed as a project manager. I regularly use my

technical skills throughout the projects I manage, and do not believe I could do my role without this knowledge and experience.

'For me, my job title as a senior project manager is not important; I identify as a chartered building surveyor, and I'm proud of my professional qualifications.

However, for some of my friends it is an issue because they want to be seen as an expert, which is understandable.'

[Sub-head] Opportunities for teamwork favoured

Although in Alice's experience project management paid her more, it isn't just about salary. She also said working as part of a team can be a particular attraction, and seeing the impact of your work on others.

'I find working with a team of professionals ... and solving problems together to be very fulfilling and enjoyable,' she added. 'I enjoy seeing projects from inception to completion and occupation[,] building the community that comes with [working on] a project, and empowering my teammates to overcome the inevitable ... complications.'

This isn't to say that building surveyors don't work as part of a team; every professional's experiences and motivations will be different. But the need to find work fulfilling and enjoyable is something noted by Clarkson et al., who identified that low job satisfaction may also contribute to the high attrition rates for women in the construction industry.

Then there are other factors to consider.

[Sub-head] Barriers can be subtle as well as overt

A 2018 Harvard Business Review article on female engineers found that reasons for leaving the profession can be overt – such as gender discrimination or harassment – or subtle, with women feeling their contributions and skill sets were less valued than those of their male counterparts. <https://hbr.org/2018/11/the-subtle-stressors-making-women-want-to-leave-engineering> Subtle stressors such as these can be exhausting when experienced on a daily basis.

Alice commented that 'other areas of building surveying [such as] dilapidations I didn't find very welcoming', while Sarah noted that 'there are times when I've been addressed in ways I think can be patronising or less respectful than I'd expect. It makes me wonder [whether] it's because of my gender or because I'm younger or less senior. While it's [difficult] to know, it can really [have an] impact on my confidence in my abilities.'

[Sub-head] Culture and structure hamper career progression

In research across occupations carried out by LinkedIn in 2015, women's concerns about the lack of opportunities for advancement and dissatisfaction with senior leadership or work culture was reportedly prompting them to leave organisations.

<https://www.linkedin.com/business/talent/blog/talent-strategy/why-women-are-leaving-their-jobs>

[Pull-out quote] 'The majority of women had no intention of giving up their career for motherhood – but that assumption appears to persist'

Barriers to career progression in the construction industry for women in comparison with men have also been cited in research by Nirodha Gayani Fernando, Dilanthi Amaratunga and Richard Haigh published in 2014; they identified an 'invisible barrier to women's mobility to top decision-making positions'.

<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JEDT-04-2012-0018/full/html>

As Alice put it: 'Leaving a job is sometimes the only way to progress. In my experience in private consultancy, I have not often seen a female graduate progress to associate level as fast as male peers [after becoming chartered]'.

This is not a new issue. In 2001, Louise Ellison published research exploring why there was a 'chronic shortage' of women in senior management roles in surveying.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242336688_Senior_management_in_chartered_surveying_Where_are_the_women

She found that female surveyors were highly educated and vigorous in applying for promotion, countering theories posited in earlier research. Furthermore, among those who responded to her survey – 358 female and 249 male surveyors – the majority of women had no intention of giving up their career for motherhood.

Nevertheless, that assumption anecdotally appears to persist, even today.

Ellison concluded that organisational structures in some form prevent promotion and that, despite equality policies, gender imbalance is one kind of organisational barrier.

Although it is unclear whether this remains the case, it is still an important consideration for those looking to retain female surveyors.

[Sub-head] Career breaks and flexible working frowned on

Those choosing to take a career break may face negative perceptions when it comes to progression as well.

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Reflecting on her return to building surveying in private consultancy after maternity leave, Sarah said: 'I felt I was no longer viewed as wanting to progress my career. Working three days a week in private practice felt like an issue, with clients expecting [me] to be on call all the time.'

As awareness of the importance of a work–life balance increases – and growing numbers of parents sharing childcare – work flexibility and managing expectations are likewise important.

Alice commented: 'Project management is probably slightly more flexible [when it comes to] having a family, as the nature of the role means remote and flexible working is more accessible.'

'Core building surveying activities such as surveys or inspections – which may take all day, if not days, to complete and are located far from home, requiring overnight stays – can be more challenging with a family.'

The seismic shift in working styles since the start of the pandemic, including greater use of online meeting platforms, appears to have resulted in greater job flexibility for many professionals across the industry, though.

For example, some split their time between working from home and the office, or work compressed hours or fewer days. Such opportunities not only benefit female professionals but all working parents, or those with caring responsibilities or other commitments. Indeed, a male building surveyor we spoke to, Steve, mentioned he had reduced his work week so he could care for his young daughter.

'Before the pandemic I negotiated a four-day week ... to spend as much time as possible with my young daughter while also reducing the already staggering cost of childcare. Although [my request] was received with raised eyebrows by my male superiors, I found support with a female director and am fortunate to have been able to work part-time for the first four years of my daughter's life.

'The arrival of the pandemic brought a noticeable change in perspective on part-time or remote working ... Most of my colleagues have taken up this opportunity and ... our clients continue to provide positive feedback on the service that they receive and it has not had an impact on productivity.'

Steve is not alone: research by Macdonald and Company last year found that real-estate employees ranked work–life balance and flexible location as the most valued perk of their current roles. <https://report.macdonaldandcompany.com/report/2022-2023/work/#section-4>

[Box-out one]

[Heading] Early engagement aims to encourage diversity

If you can't see it, you can't be it: surveying needs to become a profession that individuals who identify as female understand and aspire to join.

What does it mean to be a woman working in surveying in the UK? Will I have equal access to promotions and senior roles? Will I be granted the flexibility I need to balance my work and personal responsibilities? Will I have the respect I deserve for the accolades I have achieved?

While more than 50% of the UK population is female, only 18% of RICS members are women. Shouldn't the workforce reflect the society it serves? Should a built environment designed for all genders be conceived by all genders?

RICS' early engagement work aims to reach young people of all backgrounds who identify as female, in schools, further education colleges and higher education institutions, and by collaborating with groups such as the Girl Guides and the Girls' Network.

It aims to ensure they understand the importance of female representation in the built environment sector, to create more sustainable and resilient cities and communities as well as advising them of the excellent prospects the profession can provide. Our early engagement programme targets those who identify as female, and we encourage female representation among our Inspire

Ambassadors.<https://www.rics.org/surveyor-careers/contribute/inspire-future-surveyors>

Graduates, interns and apprentices coming into the profession who identify as women have the potential to bring fresh and innovative approaches to the way things are done. They are open to learning, and often have digital know-how beneficial to any organisation.

We need to ensure we provide female talent with the best possible experience, support and career progression, reinforcing a culture of respect and inclusion. As

part of its support for early-career professionals, RICS Matrics looks after the interests of members who have just entered or are not long in surveying, and we are working on making Matrics more accessible and inclusive globally.

To find out more about RICS' early engagement strategy, contact RICS head of early engagement and enrolment Sarah Noble [mailto:snoble@rics.org].

[First box ends]

[Subhead]Equipment and safety provision found wanting

The *New Civil Engineer* recently picked up how the issue of personal protective equipment (PPE) is gendered as well, with Thomas Johnson highlighting that it can be unsuitable for women in terms of safety, comfort, fit or religious beliefs.

<https://www.newcivilengineer.com/innovative-thinking/why-ppe-designed-for-women-is-as-much-about-safety-as-comfort-28-03-2023/>

In a recent article for the RICS website, Kat and Fiona Parsons also pointed to the difficulties they had in recruiting an all-female workforce for the design and construction of a standard domestic extension, <https://www.rics.org/news-insights/are-there-any-female-surveyors-out-there> with greater risk of injury from poorly fitting equipment among many other issues they faced.

Safety also extends beyond PPE, as Alice remarked: 'Building surveying often requires more instances of lone working, and this is a big consideration[,] especially ... on more remote sites.' That is a concern for all employees and employers, not just women.

[Sub-head] Gender pay gap persists

Meanwhile, the now widely reported gender pay gap still varies considerably between companies, regions and countries. Depending on the analysis undertaken, it may include a range of roles from administrative and supporting functions through to qualified positions, specialists and directors.

As Fernando et al. noted, there have been higher concentrations of women in clerical and secretarial positions and fewer professional females in top management positions than men, with the potential to skew the pay gap data.

In its 2022 analysis of all occupations in the UK, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) found that higher-earning women still experience the largest proportional gap between their hourly pay and that of men in equivalent positions. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/genderpaygapintheuk/2022>

However, although Supply Chain Sustainability School analysis on the construction industry – also conducted last year – found that the gender pay gap was worse than the ONS reported, managerial and professional roles have a lower pay gap.

<https://www.supplychainschool.co.uk/diversity-survey-results-2022/>

In 2023, Macdonald and Company found a difference of 37% in the median salaries between males and females in the real estate industry globally [https://report.macdonaldandcompany.com/report/2023-2024/].

In the UK, the median male real estate salary was £80,000 versus £58,000 for females – a difference of 31.9%, the gap having widened in the last three years. However, as this is based on median salaries, the gap may vary depending level of experience (e.g., newly qualified).

It should be noted that 73% of respondents were male, 25.7% female and 2% preferred not to say or self-described, which may impact the results. There are multiple contributory factors [<https://report.macdonaldandcompany.com/report/2023-2024/>], but the greatest factor identified for the inequality in the gender split was found to be due to females accounting for only 10% of the most senior professional category.

This is, of course, not the same in all firms, and a number of organisations continue efforts to reduce their gender pay gaps.

[Sub-head] Fulfilment, inclusion, pay and flexibility all critical

So how do we retain more women in building surveying, and surveying more generally? Although there is no silver bullet, and solutions will very much be based on individuals and their respective contexts, there are a range of different considerations.

In relation to retention, Clarkson et al. suggest more flexible working practices, mentoring and role models, more inclusive working environments, greater support for those with families, and more women's networking opportunities and events.

Recognising the value of individual professionals' contributions is also important, avoiding comparing colleagues who may have different skills and experiences.

Where possible, all employees should have an opportunity for interesting work, which helps provide a sense of fulfilment and, if they are seeking career progression, enhances their skill sets.

Enabling a supportive, inclusive work culture is a further component of retention, and extends to clients, consultants and contractors. Of course, some behaviours are unconscious, and these can be more challenging to address. Having an effective equity, diversity and inclusion policy in place can help, but only where it is successfully applied and part of the company culture.

Reviewing and addressing the pay gap is important, as is considering organisational career progression structures. This applies to a broader staff base than women, with the potential to have a positive impact on other underrepresented groups.

An effective flexible working option would also benefit a wider employee base than just women, and may attract a greater range of people and talent. Following the pandemic, many organisations have seen the benefits of remote and home working.

There have also been various discussions of a four-day working week.

<https://www.jll.co.uk/en/trends-and-insights/workplace/can-a-four-day-workweek-revitalise-working-life> However, clear boundaries should be set to manage the expectations of colleagues, other professionals and our clients.

Career breaks meanwhile can be taken for a range of reasons, and greater support for those returning to work afterwards can be of different forms, whether it aims to reintegrate individuals into an organisation, help them learn new skills or build their confidence.

[Sub-head] Building networks for support and mentoring

The need to inspire confidence extends beyond those returning to work and should include those already employed. Fostering stronger networks both within and outside organisations can help build a greater sense of belonging, enable informal and formal mentoring, and encourage the development of support networks.

Spearheaded by Stanhope senior asset manager Vanessa Murray, the national Mentoring Circle <https://mentoringcircle.co.uk> for instance supports professional women in real estate, mentors and mentees alike.

Groups such as Women in Property <https://www.womeninproperty.org.uk/> and Marion Ellis' Women in Surveying on social media have also provided various support and network opportunities. Where possible, every woman in the profession should be able to seek out a mentor and offer their mentoring skills to others.

In the South West of England in particular, female building surveyors are working with others to build a strong supportive network, with a mentoring initiative established at the University of the West of England Bristol that incorporates professional development opportunities. <https://www.uwe.ac.uk/research/centres-and-groups/scu/projects/women-like-me>

There are also opportunities to support early career surveyors by nominating them for prizes such as the RICS Matrics Awards and the Women of the Future. This can help both champion the brilliant talent in the industry as well as support nominees in developing confidence and a wider network. <https://www.rics.org/training-events/rics-awards/matrics-surveyor-awards> <https://awards.womenofthefuture.co.uk/>

We believe building surveying is an amazing profession. Retention is a key part of keeping that profession diverse and vibrant, representing our wider society. Keep

supporting each other so the profession retains your talent and invests in your pipeline. Keep the dialogue going.

[Box-out two starts]

[Subhead]Improving representation of women in surveying

In the 53 years since women first became RICS members, the proportion of women in the profession has only grown from 1% to 18%. Women in surveying, and the wider built environment sector, face recurring challenges throughout their careers due to discrimination and bias, inequity in pay and development opportunities.

There is a significant career gap between men, who on average leave RICS after 29 years, and women, who are still leaving after an average of only 16 years. In a recent survey, professionals shared experiences and insights on the barriers to women progressing and maintaining careers in surveying, and what more the sector can and should be doing to promote and achieve gender equity.

To find out more about our diversity, equity and inclusion strategy, contact RICS head of diversity, equity and inclusion Sybil Taunton. <mailto:staunton@rics.org>

[Box ends]

Names have been changed to ensure the privacy of those who provided insights for this article; we are grateful to them for sharing their professional experiences. Thank you also to Anthony Walker for providing information on Churchill's statement about surveying.

Dr Samantha Organ MRICS is an associate professor in building surveying at University of the West England, Bristol

<https://www.uwe.ac.uk/>

Contact Samantha: Email <mailto:Samantha2.Organ@uwe.ac.uk>

Jo Williams MRICS is a partner in building consultancy at Sanderson Weatherall, a former national chair of the Association of Women in Property, and an RICS APC chair

<https://www.sw.co.uk/>

Contact Jo: Email <mailto:jo.williams@sw.co.uk>

Related competencies include: Diversity, inclusion and teamworking, Inclusive environments

[Possible pull-out quotes]

'Some female building surveyors don't leave surveying but make the transition to other pathways'

'The majority of women had no intention of giving up their career for motherhood – but that assumption appears to persist'