



Spotlight on...
women in construction

**CONSIDERATE
CONSTRUCTORS
SCHEME**

Case Study: Crossrail 2

Michele Dix – Managing Director

1. WHAT FIRST ATTRACTED YOU TO WORKING IN THE INDUSTRY? HOW DID YOU FIND OUT ABOUT TRANSPORT PLANNING AND CIVIL ENGINEERING AND WHAT QUALIFICATIONS DID YOU REQUIRE?

I was good at maths and physics at school but was also good at art and creative activities. A careers adviser suggested civil engineering and it ticked all the boxes.

I did a BSc in Civil Engineering at Leeds University (1973 to 1976). I really enjoyed the transport course and so decided to do a PhD in transport and land use planning at Leeds in the Civil Engineering Department but working with the Transport Studies Unit (1976 to 1979). I then got a graduate trainee job at the Greater London Council (1979) and gained my civils chartership (MICE) specialising in transport (1982). I am now a FICE, FCILT and FCIHT.

2. TELL US ABOUT YOUR CURRENT ROLE(S). WHAT DOES A TYPICAL DAY LOOK LIKE? WHAT DO YOU LIKE AND DISLIKE ABOUT THE ROLE?

I am currently the Managing Director of Crossrail 2. A typical day involves getting in just after 8am and going home at 7pm. The hours outside of the normal working day allow me to do my 'work' as the rest of the day is generally filled with meetings. These can be internal ones with staff discussing the details of specific pieces of work, TfL Executive Committee meetings with other MDs discussing TfL policy and the overall business plans, ones with suppliers about Crossrail 2 and with key stakeholders and the public affected by the scheme.



I also have external engagements where I am invited to talk about Crossrail 2 and transport more generally, major project challenges and equality and diversity in the industry.

I love my job. I am 62 and could have retired at 60 but wanted another challenge. Crossrail 2 is that!

3. WHAT QUALITIES ARE REQUIRED TO DO YOUR ROLE?

I would say patience, willingness to listen and learn, to have lots of energy, enthusiasm and perseverance, and be appreciative and supportive of those who work with you. Also always have a plan B.

4. WHAT ARE YOUR FUTURE CAREER ASPIRATIONS?

To get this job done.

5. HAVE YOU ENCOUNTERED ANY OBSTACLES IN YOUR CAREER BECAUSE OF YOUR GENDER?

I was never aware of any obstacles until I joined TfL in 2000 as the Director of Congestion Charging and job shared with a male colleague. We both came in on a Wednesday to do shared meetings with staff and stakeholders. It was the first time I realised there was bias. When I entered a meeting with him it was assumed by many attendees that I was his PA and I would be asked if I would get the coffees. I did and then I'd sit down and chair the meeting. It made people think twice, but it also made me realise there was an issue for women out there.

6. IN THE TIME YOU HAVE WORKED IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT, DO YOU THINK THE INDUSTRY HAS IMPROVED ITS ATTITUDE TOWARDS WOMEN?

Yes – especially in the past 5 years. There is a clear business case to be able to get more people into the construction industry and so a need to ensure people of all genders, ethnic backgrounds, etc. are encouraged into the business.

Also there is clear evidence that a diverse board is a more effective board – hence the need to get more women and people from different backgrounds into senior roles. It has been slow in coming but changes are being made.

7. WHY DO YOU THINK WOMEN REMAIN UNDERREPRESENTED IN THE INDUSTRY?

They are still underrepresented at present but I think we are starting to move in the right direction. We need to recognise the need for more flexible working arrangements, especially if we are to encourage women back after taking time off for children. Flexible working also makes life better for all staff who may have other responsibilities beyond work e.g. carers, fathers.

We also have to tackle the issue of 'culture' – making work places good places to be – where people feel valued and can speak up and be listened to.

8. WOULD YOU RECOMMEND THAT YOUNG WOMEN SEEK OUT CAREERS IN CONSTRUCTION? WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE THEM?

I have thoroughly enjoyed my career. It has been very varied, challenging and exciting. There are many opportunities to work in different roles and environments and there are lots of opportunities to work abroad.

I would encourage others to join but only if they think they would enjoy it. Every career move choice I have made has been on the basis of deciding whether or not I would enjoy my next role. I have never been driven by promotion – just seeking an interesting challenging job – be it a sideways move or up. However as a consequence I have been promoted. So I would encourage people to take up what they enjoy – especially as you spend so much of your waking day at work.

9. HOW DOES A DIVERSE WORKFORCE BENEFIT THE INDUSTRY AS A WHOLE?

We need more people in the industry and so we need to attract people from across all diversity groups. It's a simple numbers game. However a diverse workforce that is representative of the communities it serves is a better workforce in that it is better able to fully understand and recognise the different needs of users, clients etc. Research has shown that a diverse board increases business performance.

10. WHAT SHOULD THE INDUSTRY AND WIDER SOCIETY BE DOING TO ENCOURAGE MORE WOMEN TO WORK IN CONSTRUCTION?

Overcoming stereotypes in schools is a good start and much activity takes place already through STEM etc. initiatives. Ensuring careers advisors actively promote the industry is important. I was lucky but some anecdotal evidence suggests not all advisors encourage girls into engineering subjects. The more girls who apply to do subjects that will support the construction industry the better.

The industry can also promote the wide range of jobs required to support construction – not just engineers, but lawyers, marketers, designers, quantity surveyors, accountants, environmentalists, health specialists etc.

However a key issue isn't just attracting women into the industry but keeping them there. A lot more needs to be done to create a more inclusive working environment – particularly one where flexible working is the norm rather than a special case. In case of the former, at TfL we have launched a programme called 'Male Allies' which has been very effective in getting men to support women in the workplace by ensuring colleagues call out bad behaviours.

11. DO YOU THINK THE INDUSTRY CAN GET TO A POINT WHERE THERE ARE AS MANY WOMEN AS THERE ARE MEN?

Yes. There are as many women as men in society – so no reason why not.

12. DO YOU HAVE ANY OTHER POINTS YOU WOULD LIKE TO MAKE ABOUT YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES OR THE BROADER ISSUE OF WOMEN IN CONSTRUCTION?

I think there are lots of opportunities out there and one message I would give to my fellow women colleagues is go for them. Be confident in your own abilities. The industry has much to offer.