

Case Study:

# BRUNTWOOD

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## BACKGROUND

With approximately 111,000 property businesses in the UK (ONS, 2022), the property sector of the UK is considered essential to the UK economy, owing to its annual contribution of around £1.7 billion to the GDP of the country (Department for Business and Trade, 2023). This sector is also estimated to generate employment for over 12 million people (Department for Business and Trade, 2023). Its size and relevance for the British economy makes this sector a particularly interesting locus for understanding gender and inclusion practices. Currently, the sector is lagging behind in closing the gender gaps. For example, the pay gaps are still sluggish, with women earning 13.8% less than men as property, housing and estate managers (ONS, 2022). Not only, women tend to be less likely to reach senior positions, with the property industry being recognised as traditionally a homogenous middle-class white male dominated industry (The Bridge Group, 2020). In particular, whilst women represent approximately 40% of the workforce in the real estate industry for graduate entry level to middle managers, at middle management and senior levels the numbers fall dramatically (Phillips, 2022). In terms of representation of ethnic minorities, only 1.2% of workforce of the built environment represents this group (Staindl and Wiedner, 2022).

## DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION AT BRUNTWOOD: KEY CHALLENGES

With over 100 properties across the North and Midlands in their portfolio, Bruntwood is a commercial property specialist and one of the major players in the UK property sector. This family-owned business has over 840 employees as a part of its community. Unlike other firms, Bruntwood covers the entire life cycle of properties where the business focus is not just on property management but also on the wider customer life cycle and related activities. This has translated into the need to have a talent pool with a wide range of skill sets which opens up the possibility of widening the diversity of employees. As such, the gender ratio at Bruntwood is reported to be 50-50 across levels and sections of hierarchy, marking it an interesting case of inclusion in a highly male dominated industry. Notwithstanding this peculiar setting, Bruntwood faces the common challenges of breaking stereotypical assumptions around the real estate and property sector.

In our discussions with Bruntwood, the company has reported to have two major challenges related to diversity and inclusion. The first is around the representation of ethnic minority groups at different levels of hierarchy. This is vis-à-vis their improvements in closing the gender gaps. According to the 2021-2022 gender gap report, Bruntwood has achieved a decrease in the gender pay gap by 6.32% to 14.49%. This represents a great direction in a short time span; however, it remains a key concern for the organisation. A further issue at Bruntwood is the representation of people living with a long-term health condition and/or disability.



## How can these challenges be addressed? Key action points from the D&I team at Bruntwood.

To navigate the challenges related to D&I discussed, the following steps are being taken at Bruntwood:

- 1.** A structured Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) programme was developed with the primary aim of addressing the key challenges faced by Bruntwood. Each of the actionable items was broken down into distinct projects making them easier to track in terms of their progress.
- 2.** Empowering employees to come forward and take a charge of the initiatives around D&I was another important step in this process. Instead of this being a 'top-down' approach, the management at Bruntwood wanted to be more inclusive in its approach and invited ideas / suggestions from the employees. This helped in starting a conversation at different levels of hierarchy and led to initiatives like reviewing the recruitment process to mitigate biases.
- 3.** As a result of including its employees in this initiative, the team at Bruntwood was able to start a conversation on this topic but it was also able to being in a shift in the mindset that D&I was not a 'special topic' needing attention but an integral part of the organisational culture, characterised by organisational management's sense of care for employees.





**4.** Sharing people's personal experiences and stories was another important step taken by Bruntwood in building a truly inclusive culture. This initiative involved recording a short two-minute video series with employees interested in sharing their journeys and ideas with the wider employee community. This not only facilitated in starting the conversation about D&I but also helped in instilling a sense of confidence amongst employees in sharing their experiences.

**5.** Furthermore, by including mandatory training modules on Equality Law, the team at Bruntwood took an important step to educate its employees on various aspects of D&I. These initiatives seem to be important steps towards not only encouraging employees to share their views on D&I openly but also in 'normalising' the discussion around it, thereby, making it to be a part of the everyday organisational language, activities and life.

**6.** Continuing with its endeavour to initiate conversations around important topics, Bruntwood launched another initiative – 'Bhive', a digital communication and engagement platform with the aim of facilitating the employees to share their views, life stories and more.

7. The team also tried to showcase the best practices like inclusive management styles, reasonable adjustments, responding to different needs. One example of an inclusive management style has been the initiative to hire and develop talent irrespective of their background. Bruntwood provides opportunities to young people to make a career in the property sector through various means like internships, apprenticeships and supporting initiatives like Manchester and Hideout Youth zones.

8. Another management tool to create an environment where employees could share their ideas was the annual engagement survey where they are asked questions on different topics like leadership, reward & recognition, diversity & inclusion and so on. This also helps the management in identifying the areas that need their attention.

9. In their endeavour to address the issue related to the preconception of the real estate sector being a 'white male dominated' sector, the recruitment team at Bruntwood not only designed a new campaign to attract women but also recruited five women apprentices within their Building & Construction department. Furthermore, the employees at Bruntwood are encouraged to have pay related discussions with the aim of creating a transparent and fair work environment.

The initiatives taken by the team at Bruntwood point towards an inclusive management style. By opening a dialogue and providing an environment where the employees are involved in shaping the D&I strategy, the team at Bruntwood seems to be fostering a culture led by the narrative, "When we know, we will help" (Emily Mathew, Social Impact Project Manager).

## **D&I AT BRUNTWOOD – IMPACT**

As a result of the initiatives discussed above, Bruntwood reported to have achieved a two-fold impact. Firstly, it seems to have made the employees feel more comfortable in disclosing information about their long-term health conditions and / or disability. The idea of recording a two-minute video series developed into a five-minute film series due to the confidence this idea boosted amongst the employees. As a result, within 18 months of launching this initiative, the percentage of total employees who disclosed that they are disabled or living with a long term health condition increased from 2% to 7%. Secondly, this impact on the employees enabled the management to learn and design a better program to support employees and their needs.





## KEY TAKEAWAYS

The D&I initiatives at Bruntwood highlight the following important aspects for a successful D&I initiative:

- 1.** It is imperative to change the preconceptions around D&I being a 'shorthand' for race and ethnicity. In order for a D&I program to be a success, it needs to have an all-encompassing approach which addresses its various dimensions.
- 2.** D&I initiatives should not only be discussed at a strategic level with a 'top-down' approach but also at the ground-level involving the wider employee community within the organisation. This could facilitate in building a better program in terms of its reach and scope to support the needs of all employees.
- 3.** By initiating a dialogue and fostering a culture of open conversations about various D&I dimensions, the senior management can co-build a strong foundation for a well-structured D&I program which will help in having a more sustainable growth and development.
- 4.** Developing a strong well-structured program around a topic as wide and inter-linked as D&I, it is important for the organisational management to identify the most crucial areas and the biggest challenges that need to be addressed. Breaking down these broader initiatives into manageable projects will help in tracking its performance in a better manner.
- 5.** Being a family-owned business, the culture at Bruntwood is built on the idea of a 'broader family' which is reported to foster care and upholds a sense of social purpose. At Bruntwood, this "deep sense of caring for each other" provided a strong foundation on which the initiatives around inclusion could be built on rather smoothly. The employer-employee relationship at Bruntwood is reported to be beyond the usual 'transactional relationship' due to the promoters' sense of understanding along with the value of "operating as a partner or as a part of something bigger" to survive and thrive. These values seem to help the team at Bruntwood in navigating through key D&I challenges in a relatively easier manner.

To sum up, the D&I program at Bruntwood seems to be based on the idea of inclusivity and the understanding of the fact that D&I in itself is a rather multifaceted area which is crucial to address. In the words of Emily Mathew, "... when we are talking about D&I, that's not a shorthand for race. We are talking about what it means to be a human being and all the different challenges and opportunities that may or may not lie within that".

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## **“What it means to be a human being!”: Managing Diversity & Inclusion in a UK Real Estate organisation.**

This summary case study was prepared by Sunanda Jain and Dr Lara Pecis for the Gender Matters project. The Gender Matters project aims to provide an overview over time of the scope and range of gender challenges facing UK organisations and to stimulate discussion and action with organisations and policymakers. The 2022 -2023 Gender Matters research project is led by the Academy for Gender Work and Leadership, Lancaster University Management School in partnership with the Work Foundation and the equality charity Diversity UK and funded by UKRI ESRC Impact Acceleration Account.

