

# **ADVERTORIAL: Expert panel discusses what businesses should do to increase diversity**

The theme of International Women's Day earlier this month was 'Embracing Equity' and the importance of engaging everyone in the workplace on the journey to a more equal future.

To mark the occasion, [Lloyds Banking Group](#) partnered with AccXel to put together an expert panel and discuss why accelerating diversity is essential for business growth.

Hosted by Business Live editor Alistair Houghton, the panel included Nicola Bird, AccXel Founder and MD; Rt Hon Mark Harper MP for Forest of Dean; Amanda Dorel, Regional Director South West for Lloyds Bank; Lindsey Young, CEO of Clarkson Evans; and Max Jeffery, Group HR Director for JCB.

The insightful discussion, which was followed by an opportunity to network, was held at AccXel's home base on the Whimsey Industrial Estate in Cinderford.

## **Restricting the talent pool**

It's clear that women are more active in the labour force than ever before but their representation in top positions still lags behind men.

Lindsey said: "I think it's really important that senior leadership positions are accessible to women.

"When you have women in those positions, it sends a message that women are welcome in that organisation.

"So just being there as a role model is really important for

encouraging women to join at all levels of the hierarchy.

“If you’re restricting your talent pool by not making those positions open to women, you lose out as a business.”

Mark agreed: “I think one of the jobs of men in organisations that aren’t as diverse as they should be, is to recognise that and do something about it.”

Nicola added: “There definitely has been some progress, though. Just by hosting events like this, we’re getting people talking about how we recruit more women in business.”

## **The importance of role models**

Indeed, the panel agreed that mentoring and encouragement are the best ways to support women in business.

Amanda said: “You want people to be able to look into your business and see others who look like them in order to encourage them to go and join that business.

“If you haven’t got that, people will find one that looks more diverse.”

Nicola said: “Construction, engineering and manufacturing are sectors where more boys tend to enter because they have family, dads, uncles, brothers, already in the industry so that’s usually how they get in.

“So there still isn’t enough representation of mums, aunties, sisters with those links. As soon as you can see it, you can be it.”

## **Harmful stereotypes**

The construction trade has long been among the industries with the lowest percentage of gender diversity in the workforce.

The panel said that work still needs to be done to overcome

harmful gender stereotypes.

Nicola smiled: "I run our business with my sister and just having two female leaders is something that's new to the construction industry.

"When we're interviewing for jobs, we have candidates who look at us like we're aliens.

"When we go to meetings with our head of education, Andy, they will always shake Andy's hand first and assume he's boss.

"Conditions and welfare on sites are much better now than they were five years ago but there is a huge amount more they can do.

"Whenever I go on site I have to ask for the ladies' room to be unlocked. You feel out of place as a woman on a building site anyway but then to have to ask for a key to use the toilet puts barriers in place."

Lindsey agreed: "Sometimes it's quite subtle things that need to change, like referring to 'lads' on site.

"Obviously no offence is intended but nevertheless it does make women feel like it's a place for the lads rather than everyone."

## **Increasing flexibility**

Workers of every gender have a hard time juggling work and home responsibilities.

Nevertheless, questions about work-life balance continue to be disproportionately posed to women.

The panel predicted that increased flexibility will widen the sorts of jobs accessible to women.

Lindsey said: "You need to get over that inertia and

reluctance to see that a job done in a certain way for years and years could be done differently.

“We talk a lot about businesses attracting and retaining women but also you’re more likely to attract and retain men if you’ve got the kind of open and diverse business that welcomes women and has a gender balance.”

Mark added: “In Parliament, some of the women who have been most successful have had partners who shared the load more equally at home.

“It’s all about creating more diverse organisations, people from different backgrounds, different ways of thinking, you make better decisions and you’re a stronger organisation.”

## **Next steps**

So what further steps are needed to help forge an equal world and impact positive change?

Amanda said: “We need to look at how schools help build confidence in our young female students so they can go out and be anything they want to be.

“That certainly wasn’t the education I had 35 years ago. I was baking cakes in the kitchen of the Home Economics department while the boys were out building things.

“We’ve done a lot of work in Lloyds Banking Group of listening to our female entrepreneurs across the UK, trying to understand the barriers they face and working out what we can do as an organisation to encourage more ladies into business and help those businesses survive and thrive.”

## **Find out more?**

Lloyds Banking Group is committed to becoming a leader in gender diversity. Find out more here:

<https://www.lloydsbankinggroup.com/who-we-are/responsible-business/inclusion-and-diversity/gender.html>