

BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

One of the country's largest construction consultancies now places its corporate and social responsibility high on the agenda

Leading international asset management consultancy, Currie & Brown, has a long heritage. Founded in Scotland in 1876, from its heart in the City of London it now has 14 regional offices across the UK and a network of subsidiary companies that spans the globe.

Pip Hesketh is Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Champion for the organisation, working with regional representatives in each office and with Director Martin Dorby. Her main role is to lead Currie & Brown's work in 'Building Schools for the Future', the government's initiative on transforming secondary education.

Building Schools for the Future is the UK's biggest ever capital investment programme in secondary education. The aim is to rebuild, remodel or refurbish every secondary school in England. 'It's a way to radically change the way we provide education to teenagers in every local community. The buildings complement and support learning transformation – they are not in themselves the solution, says Hesketh.



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'Some organisations have a separate diversity and equality programme. Here, it's very much central to what the staff do, right down to the local level. Although the agenda is very much led by the board, ideas and contributions come from the staff. It's been a bottom-up development.'

Currie & Brown has self-nominated regional representatives in all 14 offices, whose responsibility it is to monitor and help promote corporate social responsibility within those regions.

'This is a double edge,' Hesketh says. 'First, we need to ensure consistency across the company when it comes to corporate social responsibility issues. Second, we have to look at adapting to local conditions, where appropriate, and incorporate local priorities to the mix. For example, it's much easier for us to encourage the use of public transport in London – getting our people in to, and out of, work on buses or trains – than in some of the regional offices because London has the transport network to support this.'

She adds, 'We're very much at the early stages of looking at the training programme for equality and diversity, although all managers must attend equality training. We are reviewing our recruitment policy, and we are collecting

data on the composition of our workforce, including the way in which particular social groups are represented in each of our offices and how this then relates to the surrounding populations.'

Women workers

Right now Currie & Brown is looking at increasing its number of female employees. Currently 31 per cent of staff are female, compared to a 52 per cent national population average. However, given that in the construction industry as a whole, women comprise only 1 per cent of the workforce, Currie & Brown is clearly an industry leader.

'Research suggests we don't raise girls to be builders; they're not encouraged in the familial setting,' says Hesketh. 'They're not encouraged to do technical subjects. Perhaps the image of the industry is too much of men lifting bricks. But there are many roles to be performed here, not just manual ones.'

Ironically, she adds, the construction industry is more diverse than many of the general public imagine. The client-facing roles are very important, for example, and many areas require 'soft skills' as well as technical skills. Currie and Brown has women and men with both.

'Women often make good leaders. I've not seen anything but openness and willingness to work with women here, regardless of their role', she says. 'However, the industry has historically been a male-dominated domain. Culture change takes a long time if you want to make it permanent, depending on the ambition in your vision. If you try to do everything too quickly, it can be easily reversed.'

Ethnicity issues

Ten per cent of Britain is comprised of black and minority ethnic (BME) people. Hesketh states that Currie & Brown is 'Working hard towards representing the local communities in which we work, but we're not there yet. Our break down is not bad for a company within the construction industry, but it's still not good enough.'

'When we've digested more information about the local communities in which we work, we'll unveil some more action plans. First and foremost we look for excellence in

staff, and we know that excellence exists right across the richness and diversity of our communities,' she says.

Hesketh adds that Currie & Brown has a diverse age range of employees and is promoting an underground scheme to bring in others. 'It's definitely one of our aims to keep a full age range within the organisation. The mix of seasoned professionals and student trainees is an important aspect of our sustainability.'

The company doesn't yet have disability data but is aiming to collect that information in the future. On lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues, Hesketh says that sexual orientation is not an area of data analysis: 'It's not a question we ask, nor will it be in the near future. It can make people anxious and we want to avoid that.'

Communities

Hesketh explains that each regional office is encouraged to develop voluntary work, with employees engaged in giving their time to local projects and endeavours. 'Obviously we work in the community with regeneration and public sector work. So everything we do has some form of impact on the community. We're part of those same communities too, we live there.'

'This is about being part of the community, not just putting money in tins. It's about being active and looking at improving the community. We've encouraged people to nominate their own choice of organisations for voluntary work.'

Such local community work might involve 'upskilling' local youth or adults, for example, getting them involved in intern schemes within the regional offices and having Currie & Brown employees actively present on community committees and boards. This initiative has been driven by the board of Currie & Brown itself.

Meanwhile, in the future Hesketh suggests that Currie & Brown will have the capacity to implement an equality impact service for its public sector clients, who often find it difficult to get a quantitative or qualitative assessment of such issues.