

CHANGING TIMES

FMJ talks to Kiran Kachela, Founder and Director of CI Projects, and her team to discuss the challenges and opportunities for a female-led consultancy working within the FM sector

Even as we enter the third decade of this century, facilities management remains a male-dominated profession. Recent research from i-FM revealed that half of FM businesses in the UK have no female representation at all at board level, while a report from the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) found that despite women beginning their careers on a par with men, by the time they reach the 46-55 age bracket they earn £13,000 less than their male peers.

It's also patently obvious that this lack of gender diversity needs to be challenged, not only for ethical reasons but also because it makes good business sense. Sodexo's Gender Balance Study showed that management teams with a 40-60 per cent gender split in either direction were more effective across a number of areas. Specifically, they demonstrated improved performance in terms of profit, employee engagement, health and safety and client retention.

The success of CI Projects (CIP), a boutique consultancy working within the FM sector, bears this out. The female-led consultancy comprises a workforce of over 80 per cent women, working across multiple FM organisations such as Bouygues, Interserve, Gov Facility Services and the NHS.

Kiran Kachela first entered the FM industry as a helpdesk operator, "taking calls about broken toilets and ceiling tiles". Her director recognised her flair for problem solving and gave her the opportunity to develop her career in the field of business improvement. Within the space of a few years she was Head of Business Improvement for a large FTSE-listed FM company, leading large, complex, business-wide change projects.



Her strong interest in business efficiency led to Black Belt certification in Lean Six Sigma, an evidence-based, data-driven approach to tackling common business challenges and helping organisations to progress by eliminating wasteful practices and improving the efficiency of processes. After giving birth to her second child, she decided to set up her own business in 2012.

She explains: "I wanted to embrace a new challenge and strike the right work-life balance. I've always had a deep passion for driving continuous improvements and wanted to create a boutique consultancy that provides an alternative to overly generic, high-cost approaches to solving business challenges.

"It was never our intention to have a predominantly female team. We do have males working on projects, but for us the key has always been about offering flexible working and a good work-life balance, which is important to me as a mother of two. Naturally, the reality is it attracts women who are keen to develop their careers in a supportive environment. It's an agenda I'm really proud to support."

She adds: "We all bring something different to the table. We are not a consultancy who places just one person into a project, as we all have different skill sets and, depending on what solution that client needs, it could be one of us or the whole team that offers the solution."

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The team is drawn from a broad range of backgrounds, including change management, HR, digital/IT and FM project management. In this way they are able to respond to a wide range of client needs, whether efficiency or productivity issues due to outmoded target operating models or processes that no longer fit the organisation's vision and need to be updated.

According to Kachela, there are plenty of theories and models in the marketplace that claim to be the best approach to change management, but she believes that no one-size solution fits all. She favours a hybrid approach to change management, leveraging different theories and experiences and applying them to the specific needs of clients and their projects.

"We are not consultants who come in, implement a short-term fix and walk away," she says. "We're all about sustainable solutions, and part of our delivery is training, mentoring and upskilling the people we work with. This is why we get called in by anyone from CEOs to operational directors who are driving certain functions and need our support.

"We're often asked to lead complex change projects on behalf of our clients because they recognise the emphasis we put on engaging their people in the process, whether it's a workplace redesign and transformation or the implementation of a new system. We also help with the tailoring of training, as without the full engagement of your team no change can be successful."

Business Change Manager Oge Zogie-Odigie concurs. "I've done some work in HR, in particular learning and development, and that's been quite useful because you've got to learn to carry people along with any big changes and help them understand how they can translate that into their work. Our job is not about persuading people to make changes – not because their manager says that they've got to do so, but because it's something which is going to add value to what they're doing.

"It's vitally important to get buy-in across the board. You'll often come across some who say 'but we've always done it this way', and it's our job to explain the benefits they will get if they try it another way. We will often bring people together to say, 'what does good look like and what can be done better?' In this way we are challenging the status quo, and that means gaining buy-in from everyone within the client organisation, from operatives to senior management."

Adds Olivia Chalmers, Business Change Manager: "Many leaders find implementing change overwhelming. Leading by example and being fully transparent is one of the best ways to begin the movement of change."

LEAN SIX SIGMA

A keystone of the consultancy is the application of Lean Six Sigma principles as expounded by Kachela, who is a Black Belt practitioner. Lean is a widely adopted management approach that seeks to create more value with fewer resources through the identification and removal of waste from processes – essentially



anything that consumes resources and produces little or no value. Six Sigma is a set of techniques and tools for process improvement first introduced at Motorola, among other organisations. Together they are a powerful combination that can boost an organisation's profit, customer experience and productivity.

Says Kachela: "Most FM organisations are facing financial challenges, compliance challenges, increasing competition and demands from clients. Ultimately Lean Six Sigma provides an evidence-based, data-driven approach to tackling these issues and helping businesses advance."

Essentially, she explains, Lean Six Sigma enables organisations to correct and improve processes that hurt their valuable collateral. "Plain and simple, it enables organisations to create efficient processes, so its employees can deliver more services with more satisfied customers.

"We have undertaken a number of Lean Six Sigma reviews for clients over the years which have all resulted in demonstrable benefits," she continues. "We're currently working on an exciting project with one of our clients to streamline their planned maintenance regime, while ensuring compliance, by adopting a total production maintenance (TPM) model traditionally used in manufacturing. This will not only result in cost reductions and reduced disruption for customers, but it will also improve the overall maintenance and condition of assets in the long run."

The adoption of new technologies, in particular data-driven digitisation within

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FM, is increasing. This data is used to inform decision-making and take a more proactive approach to facilities management service delivery, from tracking reactive maintenance trends to helping to streamline processes and services to improve performance.

Becky Kendall, Project and Programme Manager, has an IT background but is not an advocate of new technology for its own sake. She argues that with any digital project, it's important to resist the temptation to leap straight towards a solution without paying enough attention to the problem. "We've seen a desire to use technology rather than people because it's cheaper and quicker and more accurate – but it's important not to ignore the change impact. How are you going to train staff up? How will managers deal with a change to their roles, and how will these changes cascade down the line?"

She continues: "Whatever the technology might be, whether it's introducing a new CAFM, an upgraded back-office system or moving to a new agile solution, you have to do it in a well-thought-out way that is carefully managed. This is where HR expertise comes in, to determine if [people's] roles have changed, how they can be upskilled and whether they might struggle with the new processes."

Another consideration is how FMs can utilise all this new data and how it can be applied to garner further insights and help deliver continuous improvement. Says Kachela: "We've seen organisations that have redesigned their workspace using digital tech so they can make it more agile and collaborative – but from day one everyone has gone back to using the space in the same way they used it before."

"We're increasingly being asked by FM organisations to provide change expertise to projects, so that right from the outset there is an understanding of a shared vision, not just that of senior executives but of all the staff – so when people move into a new workspace, they understand the intentions of how the space is meant to be used."

THE GENDER CHALLENGE

Working within such a male-dominated sector has had its challenges for the mainly female team. Kachela explains: "For me as a young Asian-British female, there are often elements of preconceptions and unconscious bias, and this does mean I have to work extra hard to be recognised for the work I do, and what I've achieved. The key for us is to deliver what we say we will, do it effectively and demonstrate our value. We're seeing more and more repeat business and referrals. This for us is the key way to overcome those barriers and earn respect."

Business Unit Director Tess Pendle has found during her experiences of overseeing major projects that being a female consultant



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has led to some people being “pleasantly surprised”. She adds: “I bring in a different perspective, especially with my change management background, so I think people do find it refreshing when we go in.”

The other major challenge for the consultancy was in January 2018 when it fell victim to the collapse of Carillion, whose infamous poor payment terms led CIP to the brink of insolvency. According to Kachela it took a lot of courage and hard work to turn things around, and as a result, like many in the FM sector she is much more risk aware. “I would say FM organisations think differently since Carillion – they’re not just coming in with the lowest price when vying for contracts. The collapse sent shockwaves through the sector and imparted many lessons. For myself, I have learnt to manage risks better and to venture more boldly into new sectors.”

She predicts that FM is moving into a new age of integrated property and facilities management. This means integrating the advisory side along with a transactional service, and a workplace management agenda being pushed by the IWFM will help influence how organisations are run.

But she adds a word of warning. “There is still some way to go to get everybody in FM aligned with that vision. While I think

there will be the increased personalisation of services with the use of smart tech, AI and apps, this will all need to be offered in tandem with robust processes. While it's great that we're embracing new innovation, we can't forget those aspects as they are the foundation for it to work.”

Her more immediate plans for the future of CIP is to “continue enjoying the work we do and make a positive impact wherever we go. Over the past few years, the company has expanded to meet the growing demand from new and existing clients – a demand that has been generated by word of mouth, demonstrating the positive reputation that our team has built, and it's something we aim to maintain.”

