



The Irish Advantage



CONSTRUCTION

NEWS

# Construction is a vibrant industry – time to put it in the spotlight

Market advisor Anne Corr is excited about the career opportunities for new entrants, but the industry could do more to spread the good news.

people are thinking: hard hats, cranes, burly blokes in hi-vis and concrete everywhere. You can't blame them. There are no shortage of TV films and dramas where professions of every kind are featured in a glamorous, interesting and sympathetic light – from forensic science to veterinary medicine, the law and business of course, police work, the list goes on. But the construction industry? The *Lego Movie* anyone? *Bob the Builder*?

## Putting Construction in the spotlight

Say the words 'Building Design', 'Land Management' or 'Property Development' and suddenly a more interesting set of images appear with skills and expertise that feel more relatable in 2019 – skills that people can get excited about one day developing for themselves. The fact is, the construction industry has been slow to market the wider range of opportunities it offers, and as a consequence, it is not an obvious career choice for many, especially women.

Construction is a people business and needs team building and good old-fashioned management skills relevant to the modern world. The industry doesn't just require people who can dig and build, but also those who can plan, design, survey, manufacture, finish and sell. None of these skills are gender-specific.

Earlier this year, Enterprise Ireland hosted *She Built That*, to shine a light on the breadth of career options available in the construction industry, and to discuss the associated opportunities and challenges. While the gender imbalance in the sector was acknowledged, many agreed that the industry is changing for the better.

## Challenges and opportunities

The [Construction Industry Training Board](#) estimates that the sector will grow at a rate of [3% over the next five years](#). By 2024 an [additional 168,500 new workers](#) will be needed to meet this demand. A great proportion of that influx will be

ideas, can respond to market changes with greater speed and imagination and attract the best talent.

“The long-reaching consequences of the previous recession are the skills-gap and workforce shortfall in the construction industry that we are now experiencing,” remarked Brendan Mahon, Managing Director at [Banagher Precast Concrete](#).

“The sector is quite simply not attracting the workforce necessary for the future although the opportunities are there,” he elaborated. “A wide gap has developed where school leavers didn’t take up college spaces for construction related courses, and trade apprenticeships experienced a huge fall-down, with the result that construction is now facing a crisis.

“I believe it is the responsibility of companies in the supply-chain and contractors alike to ensure the future of construction by advocating apprenticeships, through education and training, by breaking gender bias and to actively encourage people in the industry – the opportunities are there, we just need to offer some guidance.”

The great secret of construction as a professional choice is that it is simply great fun to be in. All the panelists at *She Built That* agreed that making great buildings and being able to point to one and say “I built that” is a fantastic thing to be able to do. The research supports this: the Dutch multinational human resources firm Randstad carried out an extensive survey into women in the construction industry in 2018 and it revealed some startling results.

Over 77% of the women surveyed said they were proud to be working in the construction industry, yet only 14% of the workforce is female, and only 21% of board members are women. Clearly, it is a rewarding industry, but all stakeholders must do more to promote awareness of this.



The She Built That panel

## Learning by example

It was inspiring to hear the story of one of the panelists, Jacqui O'Donovan, who at 19 took on the family waste management firm following the sudden death of her 51-year-old father. She turned the £175,000 business she inherited into one with a turnover of £21M.

A lot of the skills and experience that gave Jacqui the confidence to flourish as a teenage MD came from days in the office watching the work of her father, her inspiration and mentor. That theme came up repeatedly with our panelists – sympathetic, trusted mentors and role models are great for anyone starting out. Having someone you can identify with helps build self-confidence and -belief and can go a long way towards overcoming obstacles along the path to success.

By the end of our *She Built That* event, the 20 invited women from Newham Council's employment agency [Newham Workplace](#) were being let in on the secret, as volunteer mentors from a number of Enterprise Ireland's construction client companies talked them through the business. You could feel a buzz of excitement in the room. We need more of that.

consultancy. Impressed by the event, she said, “One of the things I liked about *She Built That* is that it shows the diversity of women in the construction industry. The women on the panel, they all started from very different starting points – they are involved in different sectors of the construction industry – the difference between property development and civil engineering is a very wide range, an example of how diverse the industry is in terms of the activities that go on within it.”

Aíne Kelly, Technical Design Manager at property development firm [St George Plc](#), was pleased to have an opportunity to share her experience through mentoring. She said, “I have been saying to everyone I speak to ‘come to our site, come to our department, come and see how the construction industry operates. Have a look and we can do some mentoring; any questions that you have before and after the visit, let us know.’ I’ve also been explaining the graduate schemes that are available in the industry at the moment. This event is an opportunity to give back really, that was really helpful for me. I think that’s what it’s really all about.”

Female role models in construction are still too few and there is an attrition of senior women who struggle to balance family and professional demands. But the numbers are growing, [6% in 2005](#), [16% in 2015](#). The growth of organisations enabling women to get on in the industry is also encouraging, as well as the growth of girls studying STEM subjects in school.

All of these promising developments will be greatly improved if the industry starts selling itself more as an exciting and varied place where everyone can flourish. UK manufacturing, fashion and tech have all had enormous PR boosts in the last decade – it’s time for Construction to have its moment.

