

# BREAKING THE MOULD

NOT SO LONG AGO, MALE ENGINEERS CLOSE TO RETIREMENT WERE THE BIGGEST COHORT OF PROJECT MANAGERS, BUT THAT'S CHANGING AS OUR PROFESSION SPREADS INTO NEW FIELDS OF ENDEAVOUR AND WELCOMES THOSE WITH DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES AND SKILLS

WORDS ADELINE TEOH

**A**IPM Chief Executive Officer Yvonne Butler, FAIPM, admits the institute finds diversity a challenge. The most visible imbalance? Gender. Membership has a heavy skew towards men—a legacy, she says, of “the predominance of our traditional sectors of engineering, construction, defence, which are male dominated”.

The AIPM Diversity Summit in June was designed to start a conversation as well as recognise the roles diversity and inclusion play in the success of project management. “We’re not optimising the project management discipline unless we have appropriately balanced teams,” says Butler.

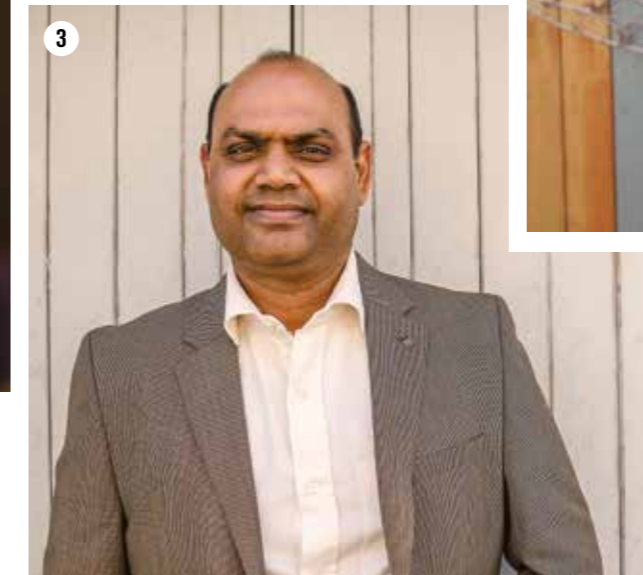
Reece Dempster, CPPM, attended the summit and noted the no-holds-barred reviews on how current practices do female project managers no favours. “These included women’s career committees, unconscious bias training, ‘manage like a man’ and the dreaded quotas,” he says. »

Malaysian-born architect Amanda Tan now leads projects for global infrastructure service provider Turner & Townsend Thinc.

Photography: Eamon Gallagher

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The biggest eye-opener, however, was coming to an understanding of how we view and deal with different team members during an exercise in which groups had to build a LEGO tower without speaking.

“Assumptions about our communication to each other is directly influencing our behaviour towards diversity and inclusion in the workplace,” says Dempster. “We need to challenge ourselves about the assumptions we make about others to manage our own outward behaviours. There won’t be any progress in equality until we look at ourselves and make the changes there first.”

There are certainly no silver bullet solutions in this initial phase, adds Butler. “We don’t really understand our own diversity of thinking yet. Gender, ethnicity, sexual preference, ability, whether we come from a country background or the city—immediately we have different value sets. All we can do as a peak body is to say it is important.”

If there’s one thing she wants project managers and their organisations to take away from these conversations, it’s that “diversity and inclusion is not an optional extra. It should just be the way we do business so we can get better project outcomes”.

### “CHANGE IS A COMMITMENT”

One thing Amanda Tan regrets is not accepting a nomination as one of the Property Council of Australia’s 100 Women in Property.

“Women shouldn’t say ‘no’ to opportunities,” Tan says. “Talking about our achievements is important to raise awareness of our contribution.” But she adds: “I don’t feel I’m ready; maybe next year.”

The 31-year-old, Malaysian-born architect switched to project management just three years ago and is now leading projects for global infrastructure service provider Turner & Townsend Thinc. When the “naturally shy and reserved” Tan started in the role, she saw how male colleagues took command of a project: creating presence, speaking up and exuding confidence.

“Culturally, in Asia, women are brought up to be quiet and humble so it has been challenging for me,” she says, admitting it’s a double-edged sword. “Sometimes women get where they are by being

overly assertive and that can make them difficult to work with. It’s a fine line.”

Tan says networking, especially through the National Association of Women in Construction, where she is the Victoria/Tasmania Chapter events chair, opened her eyes to diversity issues. “We’re not there yet. [But] people acknowledge that women are as capable as men. Diversity is a commitment. Change is a commitment.”

Tan is one of the fresh faces taking project management into the future. There’s good reason to seek project managers like her from more diverse backgrounds: as project management is recognised outside mainstream sectors, the types of people who call themselves project managers will change.

For Sue Linney, MAIPM, director of Innovation Force and former NSW chair of AIPM’s Women in Project Management special interest group, what’s needed is a paradigm shift that “goes beyond diversity and inclusion and focuses more on value, equality and fairness”, she says.

“We need to be thinking more creatively about the issues of inclusion and diversity, and about how the issues that confront women in fact confront all of us: we are interlinked,” Linney says. “The benefits of that creative endeavour will flow through to everyone.”

The 2015 Diversity Matters study by McKinsey supports this, having found that a gender-diverse company is 15 per cent more likely to achieve financial returns above the national industry median and an ethnically diverse company is 35 per cent more likely to outperform the median. McKinsey defines diversity as “a greater share of women and a more mixed ethnic/racial composition in the

leadership of large companies”. But diversity extends into the very fabric of organisations and includes people from non-English-speaking, Indigenous and marginalised backgrounds, the relatively very young and senior ranks, and communities like LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and the spectrum of gender and sexuality).

Project managers are well placed to take advantage of diversity, says Linney. “Project management should be able to embrace and prosper from diversity and inclusion more easily than mainstream business because projects exist for a specific purpose and can try new approaches, be more agile.”

And the benefits of diversity and inclusion need to be communicated broadly. “As project managers are all too aware, frameworks, policies and procedures are not enough. To bring about real change, it is so much about hearts and minds.”

### THE MEETING OF MINDS

Communication is the key to true inclusiveness and “project management is essentially about communication”, says Raju Dharani, CPPD. The program manager worked in India, Malawi, Botswana and New Zealand before he took a role at Queensland Urban Utilities. Relationship building varies by country but this unfixed area is where project managers can acquire valuable skills.

“A good dose of overseas experience helps you be more inclusive as it provides perspective and exposure to different cultures,” Dharani says.

While being able to talk to clients, team members and stakeholders is important, listening is essential. “It’s a profession where you need to coordinate people, often with different backgrounds, so you need to have that inclusive mindset.

“It is very important for every individual in the team to be able to say what they think about something. At the end of the day the outcome could be agreeing to disagree but that channel of letting them voice it out is very important.”

Disagreement could well be as significant as agreement, according to Dr Katie Spearritt, CEO of consultancy Diversity Partners. “When we hear dissent from someone who is different to us, it provokes more thought than when it comes from someone who looks like us,” she says.

In practice, this means a team will better integrate different perspectives, leading to more innovative solutions, better decision-making and improved performance, says Spearritt. “There’s also a case for having demographic diversity from the perspective of understanding customers better.”

To encourage these benefits, a leader must “create a culture where people feel psychologically safe to speak up,” she says. This is often difficult for staff »

1 Sue Linney, MAIPM, Director at Innovation Force.

2 Yvonne Butler, FAIPM, CEO of the AIPM.

3 Raju Dharani, CPPD, Program Manager at Queensland Urban Utilities.

4 Dr Katie Spearritt, CEO of Diversity Partners.

Image: (2) Adam Hollingworth

### FAST STAT

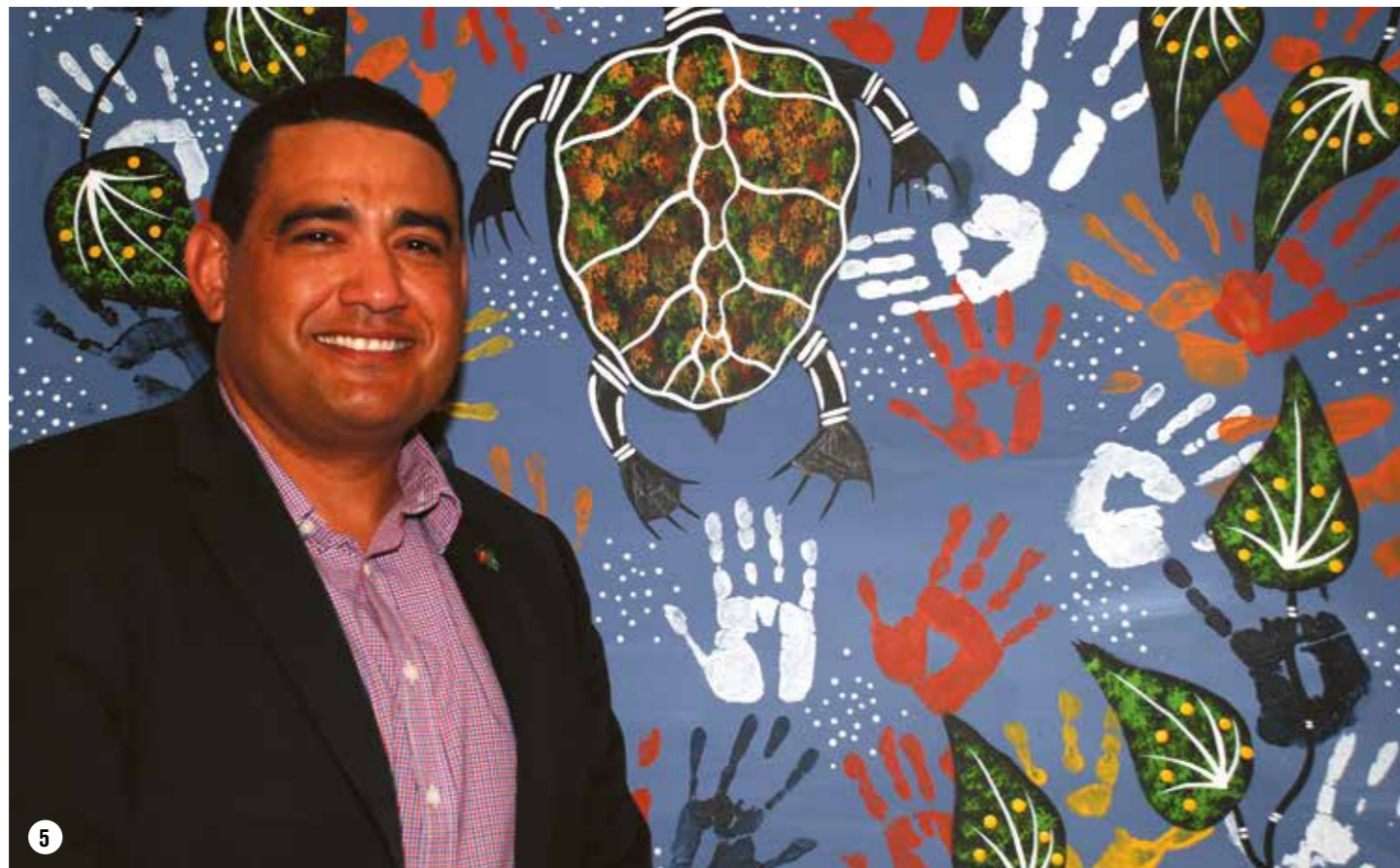
25%

of AIPM members are women

Source: 2016 member survey

**FAST STAT**

**4.6%**  
of AIPM members  
are under 30  
Source: 2016  
member survey



who feel marginalised. She suggests appointing a devil's advocate, eliciting a dissenting view from every team member or having role models present alternative arguments to establish a culture that welcomes different perspectives.

Diverse teams take longer to gel, which means they rarely outperform homogenous teams in the short-term but progress rapidly thereafter. "It is uncomfortable," Spearritt admits. "[But] it's really important that we hear alternatives; that we actively, consciously seek out multiple perspectives, because otherwise we're blindsided – whether it's by our own biases or by not having thought about a potential scenario."

**COMMITTING TO INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES**

With Warrigal Employment, Laing O'Rourke has started to connect with schools, inviting students into its projects. That way, it hopes to encourage a school-based apprenticeship scheme to increase Indigenous interest in construction jobs.

Part of this is due to the 2015 Commonwealth Indigenous Procurement Policy, written to increase Indigenous participation in government projects. In 2017–18, the Commonwealth target is 2 per cent of

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– Yvonne Butler, AIPM CEO

domestic contracts going to Indigenous enterprises; by 2019–20, it will be 3 per cent.

Torres Strait Islander Murray Saylor of Tagai Management Consultants says the target is a challenge and an opportunity.

"The problem is projects are short-term and Indigenous communities want meaningful, sustainable employment and prosperity. It's no good when a project comes in, provides short-term employment and training and then they leave," Saylor says. "Then another project comes in a few years later and all the training is out of date. If those



**“Diversity is more likely to give you better solutions and a more sustainable business.”**

– Ken Morrison, Property Council of Australia

people follow the jobs out of the community we lose human capital and part of our cultural footprint. It can be a false economy."

The upside is that organisations are finally paying much closer attention to what Indigenous communities want from employment initiatives,

and many have already engaged with the often-complex Indigenous procurement process.

Saylor hopes that organisations eventually see the policy as less of a quota and more as an opportunity to better understand communities and improve social and commercial prosperity. "It's about cultural competency, regardless of diversity."

**FROM COMPLIANCE TO CREATING OPPORTUNITIES**

Property Council CEO Ken Morrison says people outside the status quo can't be expected to change it without support, but a lack of maturity is still a characteristic of many organisations, according to the council's benchmark survey.

"The report card wasn't great. Most organisations in the industry still saw diversity as a compliance issue," Morrison says.

So the council is addressing gender disparity – the most visible gap in the industry – by launching the 100 Women in Property program that elevates and celebrates female achievers. Now in its second year, there are 500 nominations and sponsors.

The Property Council also has a Male Champions of Change group with 22 industry leaders who have a direct impact in the organisations they lead "and

also a much broader ripple effect", Morrison says. "The rest of the industry sees those leading CEOs doing something and recognises that those organisations are going to be using their supplier power to effect change."

The council runs about 500 events a year and has made it a priority to be inclusive when showcasing experts and inviting panellists. It has a stated committee participation target of 40 per cent women – a figure it exceeds at 43 per cent: that's "a doubling in just over two years", Morrison says.

But targets don't mean anything without removing the barriers that prevent women reaching leadership roles, he says. The number of male and female graduates entering the industry has been roughly equal for decades, suggesting issues occur after they establish their careers. Morrison says good parental leave provisions and flexible working arrangements may benefit women initially but they also benefit all employees and that makes organisations employers of choice.

Without these initiatives, attracting, developing and retaining a pipeline of talent is difficult, says Darren Hubscher, CPPM, project leader at construction company Laing O'Rourke that "actively recruits, mentors and coaches graduates" from engineering disciplines at university.

But Hubscher believes it isn't just employer policies and provisions that lead to greater diversity and inclusion but how comfortable people feel in the workplace. He says that's characterised in many ways, from his gay workmates "who are open and proud on job sites", to the organisation offering the space for people to practice their religion, as well as its Indigenous reconciliation and participation priorities. ♦

5 Murray Saylor, Managing Director at Tagai Management Consultants

6 Ken Morrison, CEO of the Property Council of Australia

**FAST STATS**

**39.42%**  
of AIPM members  
are over 50  
Source: 2016  
member survey