

# WE WANT CHANGE!

Building's first survey of the perceptions of young people working and studying in construction reveals its future leaders to be made up of optimists who are happy in their work. But dig deeper and they also voice many criticisms of an industry that too often seems to overlook fresh talent.

**Jamie Harris** reports

Young people today have a lot to contend with. There used to be an assumption that each generation would be better off than the one before it, but according to an investigation by the Resolution Foundation published last year, this is no longer the case. When it comes to housing and the labour market progress has stalled. While unemployment among young people is relatively low, pay growth since the economic downturn has been weak: weekly earnings for millennials (born 1981-2000) who have turned 30 are less than when generation X (born 1966-80) hit the same age. Millennials are also only half as likely to own their home by age 30 as baby boomers (born 1946-65) were by the same age. In short young people are bearing the brunt of the gig economy's rise, and when saving for a deposit for a property now takes the average 20-something 18 years, "generation rent" looks here to stay.

That's the general picture of the country's younger population, but how are young people working in construction faring? Our guest editors wanted to find out what this cohort thinks of the employment opportunities within the industry and so last month Building launched an under-30s perception survey.

And the message we got back was loud and clear: the vast majority of the respondents (nine in 10) are happy in their job, while the same



proportion of those studying for a construction qualification say that they are enjoying their course, citing the rewarding nature of the courses and the easy transfer they anticipate into a practical working environment.

But it's not a clean bill of health. Young people still think there are some key areas in need of improvement. Top of the list is that construction needs to change its work-life balance patterns, its long working hours and the amount that it is paying its more junior staff. Reading the many lengthy responses to open-ended questions about how the industry could improve, this is clearly a subject that triggers strong feelings - at times it felt like some of this was the first chance these young professionals had had to speak out.

Here's one typical respondent: "Honestly, a lot needs to change. More focus on quality, better pay. I would not recommend construction as a career currently." And another says: "A salary that matches the amount of labour you put into studying and work."

So what significance should we attach to these criticisms over pay and working hours? Can construction employers take comfort in the findings of overall satisfaction levels or do they need to question and listen to their younger workers a little more to understand some deeper concerns that may be simmering beneath?

### A good set of results

You could argue that our survey, which reached nearly 500 young people either working in construction or studying for a related qualification, was resoundingly positive about the industry as an employer.

An overwhelming 97% say they are confident of finding work once they are qualified, and 94% of respondents currently in work feel secure in their

## 68% SAID CONSTRUCTION WAS THEIR FIRST CHOICE AS A CAREER - THIS DROPPED TO 60% FOR WOMEN

job. When broken down to respondents aged 25 or under, that figure rises to 98%.

And the current crop of incomers to the industry are ambitious, too. Most (89%) aspire to a senior leadership position in construction - and 38% of those aspire to have that senior role within five years. Around six in 10 under-25s who aspire to a senior leadership position want to do so within 10 years.

A majority (70%) are of the view that construction careers are satisfying and fulfilling, and that a career in the industry is "full of variety" and "exciting and enjoyable". One respondent seemed to sum up this positivity with "no two days I work are the same". This is a picture of professionals who are motivated by challenging projects, keen to problem-solve and hungry for new opportunities.

But that's not the whole story.

### Pay and working hours

A short time working in the industry (more than half have been in their role for under two years) appears to have taken its toll on many of our survey's respondents. The survey did not specifically ask about pay and working conditions, but when asked the open-ended

question: "If you could do one thing to change the construction industry, what would it be?", the top concern was pay and working hours, with 16% of respondents flagging this as an issue.

"We need to improve efficiency and working hours - these need to be reduced to improve work-life balance," said one respondent, while another said that the emphasis on completing projects as fast as possible needs to change.

"This results in long working hours, unnecessary stress when projects are delayed. People are starting to realise that time is their most valued commodity, and if long hours are still maintained, it will drive away more people."

"For the amount of stress and pressure given to professionals, the money they make when not in London is quite low," said another, while one respondent feels a complete change in mindset is required: "Change the culture - attitudes of younger people towards work-life balance are very different to older generations. There is no flexibility regarding this and no indication that attitudes are changing."

This seems to be a real outpouring of resentment from some of the respondents, and in part the emphasis on pay and long hours may reflect the large proportion of respondents who are architects (24%), a profession known to receive less pay than others in the sector. According to Building's most recent salary survey, published in February this year, graduate structural engineers earn between £23,000 and £29,500 while Part I-qualified architectural assistants earn between £16,000 and £22,500 on average. Graduate quantity surveyors earn between £21,500 and £29,000.

Our graduate guest editors can empathise with the strong feelings expressed in the survey. Emily Scoones, structural computational design engineer at Ramboll, says: "It's not really surprising, I see it within the industry - there are a lot of people concerned about their work-life balance, the pay that they get, especially relative to other industries."

Annabel Le Lohé, senior planning consultant at WYG, says that a feeling of stress and concern about pay and long working hours is quite common: "I have experienced other people feeling stressed about it, or many people cancelling engagements because they've got to stay and continue something until 8pm. It happens across the board, but the frequency in which that occurs is higher at entry level."

### More concerns

Calls for change were not limited to pay and conditions. As a traditionally male-dominated industry, construction has been working hard to improve its image, as well as its gender diversity. Gender pay gap reporting practices and a number of schemes have highlighted the entrenched problem the industry faces and have worked to address the imbalance - and this isn't »

BETTER  
WORKING  
HOURS

## METHODOLOGY

Throughout planning discussions, Building's guest editors stressed the need to get their cohort's voices heard; a perception survey was identified as a way to gather the sentiment of younger people in construction across different regions, ethnicities and disciplines - vital in capturing the full picture of attitudes.

Building surveyed 476 construction professionals aged 30 or under between 22 March and 8 April.

- 49% of respondents were 25 or under, and 41% were female

- 24% worked or studied in architecture, 24% in commercial construction, 12% technical surveying, 11% on-site construction, 9% engineering, and 6% building services, with the remainder made up of other disciplines

- 25% of respondents identified with a group other than White British - higher than the industry-wide figure

- 39% said they worked or studied in Greater London

- 27% joined construction via a graduate scheme

- 22% joined through an apprenticeship

» going unnoticed by the younger generation. Nearly seven in 10 respondents believe the construction sector is actively seeking to increase the number of women entering the industry. But many feel there is still a long way to go: 51% disagreed that construction offers as many opportunities for women as men.

Old attitudes about gender segregation in careers clearly remain: while 45% of male respondents said construction was suggested to them by careers advisers in school or university, that figure drops to 23% for female respondents.

Construction needs to be an "even playing field" for men and women, said one respondent, adding: "I have already had to develop quite a thick skin in order to deal with often unfair criticism."

"You shouldn't have to prove yourself just because you are a young female," said another.

One respondent said there needs to be more women in the higher ranks to inspire more girls to join construction, while another asked that the industry adopt better maternity packages for women. "I am not looking forward to the day I have to tell my boss I am with child."

### Modern, sustainable construction

The report *Modernise or Die* by Cast's Mark Farmer has put industry modernisation squarely on the agenda, most recently evident in the government this month releasing a publication on modern methods of

construction, - and the issues have not gone unnoticed among younger professionals in construction that this industry is far behind other sectors. Respondents appear concerned that as a sector construction has a reputation for being backward-looking in its attitudes and ways of operating, with 38% disagreeing that it is respected by the public.

Said one respondent: "We must move it forward in terms of technology and the digital era; it seems to be lagging behind other industries," while another said: "Bring it up to date with digital - it's massively behind." Another said: "The industry needs to be more up-to-date with digital - it's massively behind"

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the global school strikes on climate change, sustainable construction is at the forefront of the minds of young people in the sector, one said: "We need to bring in stricter sustainability laws to ensure all new construction builds are future thinking".

"There needs to be more pressure from the government on companies to act sustainably," said one, while another believes the sector needs to drastically reduce the amount of carbon emissions produced: "We need to actually think about the impact we have on the planet, and not just because it ticks a box."

"Companies like to appear like they are doing enough, rather than realise the importance of the issues," said one.

### Are you listening?

But is the industry listening to what its new generation want? Things need to change on that score too, according to one respondent: "I have noticed that older people with more experience look down on younger people very often, and sometimes do not listen and respect them as much as others."

The industry finds it just as hard to reach out to school-leavers as it is at listening to its current cohort of recent entrants. When asked how construction can be more successful at attracting young people to work in the industry, a large

## FOR THE AMOUNT OF STRESS AND PRESSURE GIVEN TO PROFESSIONALS, THE MONEY THEY MAKE WHEN NOT IN LONDON IS QUITE LOW

### SURVEY RESPONDENT

number of respondents pointed to the need to get into schools and explain the variety of roles on offer.

"There's a tendency for only architects to be recognised by the general public," explained one respondent. "There should be more outreach for the impact that design engineers have on buildings and society - engineering roles are kept very much in the background."

"Very few students are aware of roles outside of contractor and architect. There's so much opportunity in the built environment which people aren't aware of," said another.

There is a perception that encouragement to enter the sector is lacking - 65% of all respondents said construction was never suggested to them as an option by careers advisers, while large proportions of respondents had never heard of particular industry initiatives set up to attract fresh talent, such as the CITB (18%), the apprenticeship levy (38%) and Open Doors (68%). Despite this, and their concerns about outdated working practices and attitudes, the current crop of 20-somethings in construction have no intention of abandoning ship. A majority said they intend to stay in the sector throughout their career.

Ramboll's Scoones is hoping that the findings act as a wake-up call for the industry to address these concerns. "[The survey] shows a much bigger, broader spectrum of people and views, I hope that it will resonate with everyone; all the issues that we have are still appearing. There now needs to be a positive way about how we tackle these concerns and spark a conversation. Hopefully the industry will listen."

The broad sentiment among young people newly entering the industry seems to be that construction does not make itself easily available as a career, and there are significant challenges for young professionals in terms of earning the pay and respect they would like, but that on the whole the sense of satisfaction they feel by being part of exciting projects outweighs the negatives. This sense of loyalty and commitment is very welcome, those business leaders who are savvy enough will want to reward it and tap into this generation's ideas for how to make things better.

91% OF RESPONDENTS CURRENTLY IN WORK ARE HAPPY IN THEIR JOB

