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Building

The role of management in creating the built environment workforce of the future



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Methodology

A questionnaire on key topics was sent out to experts. Feedback from this survey was analysed, alongside recordings from a further interview and roundtable discussion, to develop the ideas that formed the basis of this report and the recommendations reached by its conclusion.

However, the views expressed in the report are those of the Building the Future Think Tank alone, and participants cannot be assumed to have endorsed the final findings.

Acknowledgments

The Building the Future Think Tank's experts on this topic were:

■ David Johnson, chief operating officer, Gleeds

■ Mark Thomson, managing director, Ryder
■ Fiona Wallace, global HR director, Cundall
■ Nathan Wilkins, customer engagement manager, Construction Industry Training Board



After the success of the Building the Future Commission in 2023, Building established its own editorial research hub, the Building the Future Think Tank, which is dedicated to producing more in-depth research and reports on behalf of the industry.

The think tank's programme has produced a variety of reports on topics including immigration, net zero, building safety and the changing workplace.

Executive summary

The built environment sector is undergoing a generational and technological transformation that is reshaping what it means to lead, manage and succeed. A new wave of professionals are entering the workforce with expectations that differ sharply from those that predominated when today's senior leaders were new starters.

Flexibility, purpose and alignment with values such as sustainability and inclusion matter as much as career progression and technical expertise. For management, the challenge is clear: adapt leadership styles, invest in skills for the future, and create cultures that turn these shifts into sources of strength.

Leadership today is less about command and more about connection. To attract and retain top talent, managers must demonstrate openness to new ways of working.

The sector is also being reshaped by digitalisation, artificial intelligence and the drive toward sustainability. Skills once considered optional are now fundamental, while continuous learning has become essential

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The sector cannot afford to rely on yesterday's practices to solve tomorrow's challenges

for senior staff as much as for their juniors. Leaders must prioritise investment in training and reskilling, while embedding lifelong learning into their organisational culture.

Culture itself has emerged as one of the strongest differentiators in the race for talent. In a market where skills are scarce, organisations that foster inclusive, supportive and purpose-driven environments gain a clear competitive edge. Workplace design, leadership behaviours and policies that prioritise wellbeing and collaboration all contribute to cultures where people are motivated to perform at their best and stay for the long term.

The sector cannot afford to rely on yesterday's practices to solve tomorrow's challenges. By embracing generational diversity, preparing their people with future-ready skills and cultivating strong, values-driven cultures, leaders can build a resilient and innovative workforce capable of driving the industry forward.



Part 1: Leadership in the age of the new workforce



Leaders today are encountering a workforce whose attitudes to work-life balance, presenteeism and the role of politics in the workplace diverge significantly from what was once the norm. Older generations often entered the industry under the belief that “going the extra mile” was the only path to professional progression. For many of today’s young professionals, however, a healthy work-life balance is prized more highly, while that same level of dedication may be directed beyond the workplace – into charitable endeavours, side projects or personal passions.

These mismatches can create tension if not navigated carefully. Leaders must invest time in understanding the nuances of the new generation, while also communicating the value of professional presence. This is not about insisting on outdated models of presenteeism, but helping staff see that showing up, engaging and building relationships often serve the very motivations that matter to them. At the same time, leaders should be mindful that young employees may be more cynical about initiatives that appear to demand extra work without clear purpose or benefit – one leader noted in particular the scepticism that can greet supposed benefits like free pizza being offered to entice people to do training during their lunch breaks.

Alignment with broader values

Another major shift concerns the expectations young employees place on the purpose of their careers. Increasingly, new entrants want their work to align with broader social or environmental values. While this can be energising for organisations, it also presents challenges when moral, political or geopolitical issues enter the workplace.

For senior leaders accustomed to a culture where politics was not a topic for the workplace, today’s environment can feel disorienting. What’s more, in businesses with more diverse and global workforces, adopting a particular ideological position as a firm can be alienating to a significant minority of staff. The task for leaders is to create a respectful workplace culture where staff can pursue causes personally without letting political expression compromise collegiality or professional reputation. Younger employees also need guidance on how strong political statements, made in professional contexts, may harm their long-term credibility in the industry.

One of the clearest shifts in workplace culture

is the centrality of flexibility. The 2024 RICS report highlighted that flexibility is the top retention factor for 72% of young construction professionals. What was once considered a perk is now a baseline expectation. Flexibility also plays a central role in fostering diversity. A 2023 McKinsey study found that 38% of working mothers identify flexibility as their top benefit and would feel compelled to leave their roles if it were unavailable.

While workers coming into the sector today may firmly insist on some degree of flexibility, it is unfair to suggest that they have no appreciation for the benefits of in-person work. The same person who might find they can carry out focused work more productively in their own home might, on a different task, value the ability to walk across the office to seek quick guidance from a senior colleague.

The challenge for leaders lies in balancing these perspectives. Developing an effective approach to hybrid working will not be achieved by prescribing a rigid ratio of time spent at home versus in the office. The true advantage of hybrid models is their adaptability: one size

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does not fit all. Overly prescriptive approaches risk diluting the benefits of remote work while still incurring its drawbacks.

Rather, it will be a question of developing an approach that allows people flexibility and enables trust-based working practices, while ensuring that as much benefit as possible is unlocked from in-person connections. This means that best practice will vary significantly between sectors, specialisms and even individual firms.

While flexibility enhances productivity and inclusion, its unintended consequences must also be addressed. The difficulty of embedding a company culture when work is primarily remote is a significant concern among leaders, and something that can both negatively impact employees' experience of work and potentially weaken the firm's brand and reputation in the way staff represent themselves to clients.

Effective relationships between managers and young employees are central to fostering a productive and engaged workforce. In hybrid and flexible working environments, this begins with clear expectations around communication

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and respect for colleagues' time. Managers must lead by example, demonstrating reliability and consistency. As one executive observed: "There's nothing worse than a young person thinking 'I'll come in, I'm going to sit down with my manager and she's going to check my work' and then you just all of a sudden don't turn up."

Senior leaders must set a standard that reinforces accountability and mutual respect across teams, both by modelling behaviours and by creating an environment where employees feel comfortable raising concerns. A person's immediate manager will have the greatest influence on their experience of work. Yet, all too often, workers feel uncomfortable raising issues related to workload, conduct or management styles. As one respondent noted, in the built environment sector, people are often more comfortable calling out a technical error than a behavioural misstep.

An environment in which open communication between junior staff and managers is encouraged is beneficial not only to younger employees but also to more experienced members of staff. Two-way transparency reduces misunderstandings and miscommunications and enables a kind of

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reverse mentoring, in which leaders learn how to more effectively manage their younger or less experienced colleagues.

Businesses need to be proactive in educating managers in these principles and in teaching new staff what standards of conduct and behaviour to expect from their leaders. If young employees don't learn these lessons in the workplace, they may be forced to seek them from less reputable sources.

Conclusions

One of the key learnings that emerges from each of these areas is the importance of a robust onboarding process. This will be important for firms that are more reliant on remote work, as they will need to embed standards deeply, but also for businesses that want to encourage greater in-person work, as it establishes the office as an effective and enjoyable environment for work rather than a begrudged requirement. This strong focus on the opening days and weeks of a new starter's time in the business is also the opportunity to emphasise the company's expectations around employee conduct and the standards of behaviour that they should expect in turn from their seniors.



Part 2: Future-proofing skills



One of the most important roles management has in creating the workforce of the future is making sure that they are equipped with the appropriate skills to thrive in the workplace. In an era when AI and other digital technologies appear to be revolutionised on an almost annual basis, this can present a dizzying challenge – particularly in a sector that has historically struggled to adapt quickly.

The built environment has always tended towards a more reactive approach to new technology, but today's managers will need to match the enthusiasm of fresh recruits for adopting cutting-edge approaches and tools. Leaders need to remain curious, retain a sense of humility in the face of technologies they are not yet familiar with, and seek out high-quality advice about how most effectively to introduce new ways of working into their businesses.

Upskilling – a two-way street

As part of this, business leaders must recognise that upskilling is a two-way street. Managers and leaders need to invest in their own development, particularly in areas such as digital literacy and sustainability, but they must also be willing to learn from younger colleagues. Many younger staff are naturally adept at working with advanced technologies and can provide valuable insights into emerging practices. Trusting and listening to them helps firms accelerate adoption while deepening intergenerational collaboration.

This does not mean, however, deferring entirely to younger professionals. Life-long digital nativity does not equal high digital literacy. Cybersecurity illustrates this vividly. Many assume that because younger employees are “digitally native”, they are well equipped to handle cyber risks. Such assumptions pose a risk. Organisations must prioritise training that goes beyond theory to include relentless testing, realistic dummy scenarios and clear education about the consequences of attacks – not only for businesses and projects, but for individuals whose reputations may be damaged. As one respondent noted, cyber drills remain far less common than fire drills, despite the potential for greater disruption.

An effective way to ensure skills development is sustained over time is to embed learning opportunities directly into daily workflows. Increasingly, firms are turning to digital learning platforms that deliver short, accessible “microlearning” modules on demand. These allow employees to strengthen technical skills,

practise communication techniques or refresh their knowledge of leadership principles in just a few minutes at a time. By making learning bite-sized and ever-present, firms normalise development as part of everyday work rather than as a separate, occasional event.

Digital platforms also generate valuable data, helping organisations track engagement and identify where staff may need more support. Crucially, this approach makes training equitable. Whether working on site, in the office or remotely, employees can access the same high-quality resources at a time and pace that suits them.

However, technology cannot replace human engagement. Leaders must also commit to regular, one-to-one conversations with employees to co-create personal development plans. By involving staff directly in setting goals and identifying learning priorities, managers build trust and create a sense of ownership over career progression. This individualised approach is particularly valued by younger professionals, who expect to see a clear link between their personal growth and the success of the organisation.

While the workforce of the future must be conversant in the use of AI and other digital tools, the increasing role of these technologies will only make strong soft skills more sought after. As AI and automation assume more responsibility for technical work, organisations cannot rely solely on the technical expertise of

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Equipping the workforce of the future is ultimately a question of mindset as much as technical skill

their staff to drive success. Instead, the ability to communicate effectively, resolve conflict, make decisions and inspire others is increasingly of value. The development of these more subtle skills is particularly challenging in the era of remote work.

Soft skills cannot be taught entirely in a classroom, but courses can be an effective way to get people thinking about how they might improve their soft skillset. The CITB, for instance, offers short training courses that focus on the softer but vital dimensions of leadership. These cover areas such as managing conflict, supporting staff through difficult times and creating an environment where the workforce remains active, engaged and productive.

One soft skill that can be challenging to foster in junior staff is the skill of management itself. This is often best developed through direct experience, particularly in difficult workplace situations. For this reason, managers must be willing to delegate responsibility to junior staff – even to the point of discomfort. Allowing young professionals to act as decision-makers, rather than simply implementing the decisions of others, is empowering and creates genuine excitement about their work.

At the same time, future leaders must understand that management is not a skillset that can ever be finally figured out. Getting the best out of a team changes year by year, as circumstances and people evolve. Leaders should therefore focus on fostering a mindset of curiosity and adaptability, equipping young professionals – as well as themselves – to thrive in uncertainty and avoid treating leadership as a secret art that is inaccessible or mysterious.

Leaders should also strive for greater collaboration across the sector, sharing best practices and finding ways to train workers for the sector, not for the needs of a single business. The real challenge is sector-wide: preparing a workforce that is collectively ready to deliver net zero, embrace digital solutions and respond to new risks.

Conclusions

Equipping the workforce of the future is ultimately a question of mindset as much as technical skill. The built environment sector cannot afford to remain reactive in the face of rapid technological change. Instead, leaders must embrace curiosity, humility and collaboration as essential traits.

Investing in digital literacy, sustainability and cybersecurity training is vital, but so too is recognising the importance of soft skills such as communication, conflict resolution and decision-making, which become more critical as automation expands. Embedding learning into daily workflows, using both digital platforms and personalised development conversations, ensures training is not episodic but continuous.

Programmes such as PlanBEE demonstrate the value of exposing young professionals to diverse disciplines and empowering them with responsibility early. Ultimately, preparing for the future means creating a culture in which learning flows in all directions – across generations, roles and organisations – so that the sector as a whole is equipped to thrive.

Case study: PlanBEE

Looking to develop a less siloed approach to bringing young people into the sector, Ryder worked with Gateshead College to launch PlanBEE in 2016. The scheme is a rotational apprenticeship in design, construction and management.

Few young people are aware of the full range of occupations available to them in the built environment, but many might have a loose sense of wanting “to build things”. PlanBEE is focused on helping such people. Apprentices complete six consecutive placements, working and learning across architecture, engineering, surveying and construction, based in leading built environment businesses while gaining a higher education qualification and earning a salary from day one.

With a 98% success rate in apprentices securing employment and progressing to professional careers in the built environment, PlanBEE has aims to create a generalist mindset by exposing participants to different disciplines. It is hoped this will enable future leaders to work across silos and co-ordinate effectively between specialisms – skills that are vital for delivering complex projects and responding to new challenges.

PlanBEE currently offers apprenticeships with over 60 sponsor companies in the North-east of England, Manchester, London and Vancouver, including: Arup, Cundall, Cast Consultancy, Fletcher Priest Architects, Gleeds, Mace, Morgan Sindall, Sir Robert McAlpine and Ryder.

Part 3: Company culture creating a competitive advantage



Culture is increasingly recognised as a decisive factor in whether businesses can attract, retain and motivate the best talent. In an era where skills are scarce and competition for high-performing employees is intense, company culture is a source of genuine competitive advantage. A well-designed workplace environment, combined with intentional leadership practices and inclusive policies, can transform organisational performance and help firms thrive.

One of the most visible ways that culture manifests is through the physical office space. Leaders emphasise the importance of doing the simple things right, rather than pursuing fads. Employees need a functional, flexible and reliable workspace that facilitates different types of activity. This means creating a mix of environments: quiet zones for concentration, open workshops for collaboration, and flexible spaces for group problem-solving.

Wellbeing must also be built into the fabric of the office. Research shows that environments incorporating natural light, biophilic design, ergonomic furniture and quiet areas significantly improve wellbeing and productivity. Smart workspace policies – such as desk-booking systems, collaboration hubs and tech-enabled meeting rooms – can reduce friction between staff and encourage greater use. Crucially, design must be inclusive and accessible, accommodating both physical and cognitive needs to ensure all staff can participate fully.

Physical space is only one way in which corporate culture is conveyed. The deeper driver of competitive advantage is the way values and behaviours are reinforced through internal communications. Leaders must ensure key principles are relentlessly communicated.

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This requires using success, failure and misbehaviour as opportunities to re-emphasise what is important and why.

That does not mean relying on bold statements or rhetoric. What resonates with employees is practical action and education. For instance, staff need to understand how seemingly small behaviours can have unintended consequences for colleagues. Quiet, consistent teaching of this kind can be more effective at fostering inclusion than high-profile campaigns that prioritise external image over internal substance.

A McKinsey study found inclusive workplaces can boost innovation by up to 20%, and many firms now invest heavily in recruitment processes designed to build diverse teams. But if the workplace environment new starters enter is not inclusive, they are unlikely to stay long.

Leaders also emphasise the importance of substantive development when it comes to diversity in the workplace. A sustainable approach is to involve people in management earlier in their careers – giving them gradual exposure to leadership responsibilities, supported by mentoring and coaching. Once again, this might require managers to delegate to the point of discomfort – but giving colleagues this trust is an important part of their development towards becoming managers and leaders themselves.

With regard to entry-level hiring, firms need to shift their attention towards hiring for potential rather than experience. Engaging with school-leavers, apprentices and university students through structured work experience or internship programmes helps businesses identify promising individuals early, while at the same time educating managers about what qualities to look for. These entry-level routes also serve to broaden the overall pool of candidates entering the profession.

Partnerships play a critical role here. By working with organisations that specialise in preparing young people for careers, firms can extend their reach beyond traditional recruitment channels. Such collaborations not only improve access to underrepresented groups but also help future employees build the confidence and knowledge they need to succeed in professional environments.

Culture is ultimately about connection. Employees want to feel part of something larger than their job description, with opportunities to collaborate, contribute ideas and build relationships across teams and geographies. Leaders need work to ensure that the workplace



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complex. Tools such as pulse surveys and anonymous feedback platforms are proving effective in monitoring wellbeing in real time. These tools allow organisations to pick up early warning signs – such as drops in morale, recurring frustrations, or high levels of stress – before they escalate into attrition

However, technology is only an enabler. Leaders must model openness, curiosity and respect in their own behaviour to set the tone. In practical terms, this means making cross-team collaboration routine, celebrating contributions from different parts of the business and creating opportunities for people to learn from one another.

Conclusions

Creating a competitive advantage through culture is not about dramatic gestures or fashionable trends. It is about doing the basics well – designing functional and inclusive workspaces, reinforcing values consistently and building genuine connections among staff. The most effective organisations recognise that culture is shaped as much by everyday behaviours as by formal policies.

Practical action – such as creating flexible environments, delegating responsibility with trust and supporting diversity through meaningful development – sustain engagement and performance. Technology can help monitor and enable these efforts, but lasting impact depends on leaders modelling openness, curiosity and respect in order to foster collaboration and belonging.

is “more than just a telephone directory”, as one respondent put it. Instead, they should facilitate social connections across borders in order to foster a sense of community and collaboration. Technology can support this effort. Digital platforms that enable knowledge-sharing, cross-border communication and informal networking help staff feel part of a global culture rather than isolated in local silos.

Tech tools can also help managers monitor the mood of the workforce. Leaders who fail to understand the pressures on their staff risk disengagement and burnout, particularly as workloads and expectations grow more

Recommendations



The built environment sector is undergoing a generational and technological transformation. Young professionals now prioritise flexibility, wellbeing, inclusion and purpose, while digitalisation, AI and sustainability demand new skills. Leaders must balance hybrid working with culture-building, embed continuous learning, and recognise that soft skills are as vital as technical expertise. Inclusive workplace design, consistent reinforcement of values and meaningful development pathways are critical to attracting and retaining talent. Competitive advantage will come from creating environments where employees feel trusted, supported and connected. To thrive, the sector must embrace intergenerational collaboration, invest in lifelong learning and cultivate openness, respect and innovation.

To this end, the following recommendations provide a framework for industry and government to draw from:

1. Reinvent onboarding as a strategic priority

Companies and industry bodies should set standards that treat onboarding as a critical first step in workforce development, not a tick-box HR process. Employers must use this moment to embed culture, set expectations and create a sense of belonging from day one.

2. Build cross-sector partnerships to widen the talent pipeline

Industry should collaborate more effectively with schools, colleges, universities and specialist organisations to identify and nurture young talent early. Government can accelerate

this by incentivising partnerships and reducing barriers to collaboration through procurement. Internally, firms must also break down silos to showcase the breadth of career opportunities across the built environment.

3. Embed continuous learning into everyday work

Government should encourage the adoption of digital learning platforms and fund skills innovation. Employers must go further by creating management cultures that use day-to-day workflows as learning opportunities – trusting employees to try new approaches and to learn through both success and failure.

4. Foster a culture of openness and curiosity

Leaders in industry need to model open communication, actively listen to staff and adapt in response to feedback. Government and other clients should help drive this change by helping reinforce this. This can be done by recognising and rewarding organisations that demonstrate genuine employee engagement and innovation in management practice.

5. Prioritise functionality over fads in workplace set-up

Businesses must resist chasing short-lived office trends. Instead, they should focus investment in practical, flexible workplaces that support concentration, collaboration and creativity – getting the basics right so employees can thrive. This needs to be considered when thinking about both the physical workspace and the structural set-up of the workplace.



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