

MENTORING Sandi Rhys Jones

Training is all very well but where's the progression?

If I had a pound for every time a managing director, headhunter or senior partner told me that he would love to see a woman on his board/leading a division/setting up the office in Hong Kong (delete as appropriate) but that he didn't know where to find one, my piggy bank would be pretty full.

Thanks to the Association of Women in Property (WiP) network we know that there are able women in the sector, many of whom are role models and mentors for others. WiP runs a boardroom series of events to inform and encourage members to aim for senior posts. It is also encouraging that last year WiP assisted *Property Week* in identifying 100 top women with relative ease compared with five years earlier.

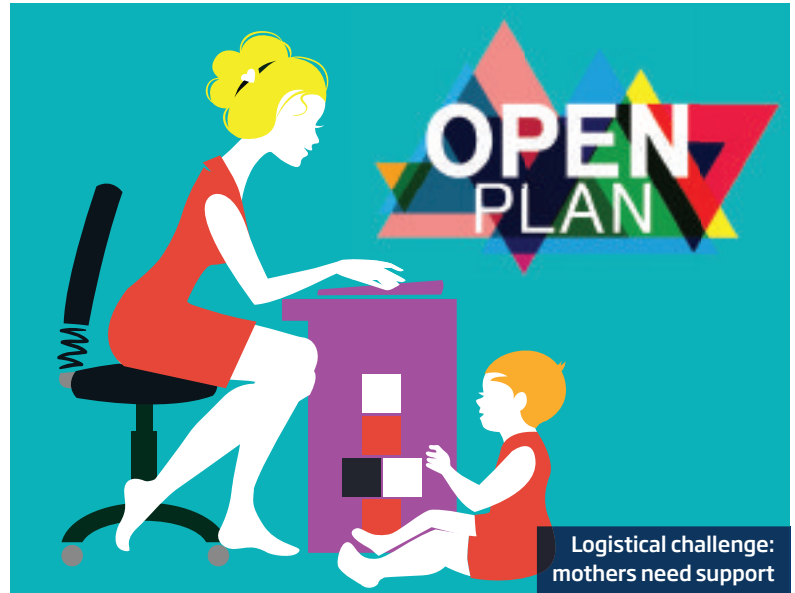
And while we all agree that we need more women on boards at executive level, don't dismiss the value of female non-executive directors. In my roles as a non-executive director, I see it as an important task to get to know the people in the business, in order to identify and champion the rising stars glimmering below the cloud layer.

But the industry needs to do more to improve progression and recognition of women in the industry. Otherwise, how are we going to meet those diversity targets that everyone now seems to recognise as being important for a successful, effective and appealing property sector?

Promoting a career in property through engaging young people in schools, convincing their parents and enlightening teachers and lecturers is very important, but there is no point filling the hopper if the pipeline is gushing out people – particularly women – later on in their careers. We need to find a way of addressing the mid-career conundrum, so that we have more diverse people at senior level – and we need to do it now.

This is the challenge that led WiP to set up the Mid-Career Task Force. We felt it was time to learn from other sectors and professions to make a step-change, and so we are sharing experience with organisations such as Barclays and Shell, as well as contractors and legal firms, to develop programmes to help property-sector companies recognise, nurture and retain talent.

'Take off, tick over or exit?' is the headline title of the taskforce, summarising the choices faced by many women juggling their mid-stage careers. We are delighted to be working with DTZ to assist in delivering programmes for its Curzon Group, a high-profile initiative in Europe, the Middle East and Africa to support and develop the women in its business. The Curzon Group was launched last November at the National Portrait Gallery, under the steely eye of one of history's greatest women, Elizabeth I. Outlining the programme, Colin Wilson, head of DTZ in the UK & Ireland, emphasised the need to take a proactive approach to develop and retain the best people.



"This does not mean that we will create special rules or quotas," he said. "It means that we will react and indeed encourage changes to traditionally accepted working practices to develop our talent pools."

A particularly important element of the taskforce programme is training to recognise and manage the unconscious bias. We know from research that it is not only a visibility issue when it comes to promoting and developing women and other under-represented groups. For example, there can be an assumption that a woman with children will not consider an overseas assignment – when many working mothers would leap at the chance to spend time away from the family; they just need proper notice and support to organise the logistics.

The other issue is follow-through. Research shows that even the best-intentioned employers provide endless development programmes for women but then fail to offer advancement opportunities. As one woman said to me: "I'm forever being trained – what I want is a challenging role."

WiP is also providing a mentoring scheme, with training for mentors and mentees, and 'how to share success (and failure)' feedback. The training provides the skills to build a mentoring relationship effectively, as well as those that are transferable into day-to-day management. WiP also offers returning to work/industry and refresher courses to maintain/upskill. Rather than using technology to add to the chains locking people to the 24/7 virtual desk, why not harness it to keep them engaged, informed and liberated to work at a time of their choosing?

The Open Plan campaign launched by *Property Week* is a great opportunity to address the diversity challenge, and I am delighted to be part of the panel set up to help deliver it. I look forward to seeing real change – and particularly stemming the loss of able people through that leaky pipeline.

Sandi Rhys Jones OBE is leader: national mentoring programme, at the Association of Women in Property

