

IF THESE WOMEN CAN...



With the construction industry still shockingly under-represented by women, FIS has set up a campaigning group to raise awareness. **Dean Gurden** meets several women who have already made their mark

It may not have an official name yet, but FIS is tackling the lack of women entering the fit-out and finishes sector by launching a special interest forum for women.

Chaired by Deborah Gore, FIS board member and HR director of Encon Group, the forum seeks to address the industry's appalling record of attracting and employing women.

"Only 11% of the construction workforce is female and less than 1% are working on building sites, which has got to be one of the worst records of any industry. So we have a lot to do," she says.

Gore agreed to chair the forum as she feels passionate about moving the industry forwards. "It's very much male-dominated and usually of an older demographic. We need a lot more diversity, with more women coming through. The industry is not just about building, it involves lots of technical and specialist jobs that are suitable for both sexes," she says.

She accepts the current situation requires a huge change in mindset, both in the people at the top of organisations and those on site. "We

need to make everybody aware of even the small changes they can make so the industry becomes more accessible to women.

"I don't think anyone sets out to exclude women from their companies, but it's often the culture that prevents this from happening or stops women working up through the ranks."

It's often an issue of perception, Gore adds. In the forum's first meeting, one member commented that there were no good role models of women who had made it in the industry.

"There was a feeling that women who are successful in the industry become quite male-like and driven by power, and have to be a bit rough and ready to fit in. But we should allow women to remain feminine and be themselves," she says.

So what exactly would Gore like the forum to achieve? "We've only had one meeting so far, but I think the first step is to get some



Deborah Gore

men to join the forum – at the moment it's just five women, which isn't very inclusive.

"Then we need to decide exactly which areas we want to tackle and how wide we want to go."

Gore talks of creating talent programmes that identify younger talent and help them rise through the ranks. The forum discussed creating focus groups to explore this and the perceived obstacles.

"Ultimately, I'd like our members to see that FIS is serious about being a good promoter of women in construction," she says.

"It's early days and we're still working out our strategy, but within a year, I'd like to see us have some specific training or perhaps a mentoring scheme in place that members can tap into – something tangible and positive."

The next meeting was scheduled for November. So watch this space.

But for now, we see how four women have made their way in construction (overleaf).

NATTOYA LEWIS, DRYLINING APPRENTICE

Nattoya Lewis is just five weeks into a two-year apprenticeship as a dryliner and interior systems apprentice with fit-out contractor Astins.

"It's definitely a new challenge for me – I haven't done anything like it before," she says, "but I like to use my hands and as soon as I got into it, I knew I wanted to do more.

"At the moment we're being taught how to use different tools to make the drylining jobs a lot easier."

You might think the job would be a stretch for Lewis – her previous job was a dance instructor – but she isn't fazed by the physical demands of working in construction.

"The boards I'm working with aren't too heavy, but I'm always being encouraged to say if I need help. And I'm the kind of person who likes to test myself anyway," she says.

She raises an interesting point – even a simple issue, such as making drylining boards smaller, would encourage more women to enter the industry.

It's not such a far-fetched suggestion. As Paul Hayter, construction trainer at Astins, points out: "The boards we use here are 1,200mm wide, but out in Sweden, where we're

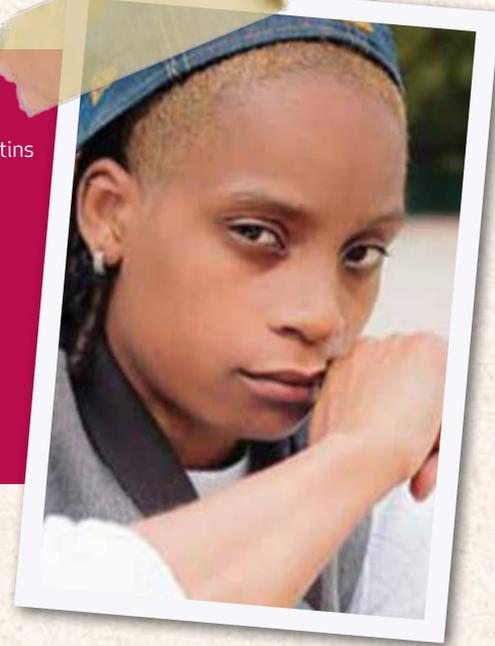
Nattoya Lewis: CV

2016	Dryliner/interior systems apprentice, Astins
2015	Night shift assistant, American Eagle
2012-14	Customer assistant, Argos
2010-12	Dance choreographer, J's Dance Factory
2011	Customer adviser, Zorba Sweets; engagement officer, Victim Support
2009-present	Manager/choreographer, Dare2Dream
2008-10	Dance teacher, Acton High School; choreographer, QPR Football Club
2007-08	Customer service/supervisor, Tesco
2003-07	Fashion retail, customer service roles

doing a hospital job, the boards are 900mm wide, which makes them easier to handle and less heavy too." Astins is currently trying get the industry as a whole to move to these narrower boards.

So how does Lewis handle working in a male-dominated environment? "You'd expect a lot of the men to react in a way that suggests I can't do the job, but I really haven't come across that kind of attitude, or anything that makes me feel like I shouldn't be here."

For Lewis, encouraging more women to enter the sector comes down to one word: publicity.



"It was actually quite hard finding this job and the apprenticeship," she says. "There definitely needs to be more publicity that there are roles out there for women in construction.

"After I did my CSCS training, I took a chance and walked on site to see what my options were. I'd love to see more women giving it a go. It's not as hard as it may seem."

LARYSA GROCOCK, OFFICE MANAGER

As a single mum with two children in 2003, Larysa Strokosh had no idea she'd end up in construction. With a single qualification in beginners book-keeping and having relocated from the Ukraine to the UK to study English and administration, she was looking for an office job, which she duly secured with Bespoke Drywall.

"I started in the office taking phone calls, but it was suggested I go and visit sites from time to time," she says. "I was initially a bit reluctant, but I gave it a go. It involved me passing my PASMA certification and CSCS."

Larysa Grocock, as she is now, works in the office dealing with the finance and projects side of the business. Her job title is office manager but "at times I'm more of a project coordinator", she says. Her typical day can involve anything from fielding phone queries, logging tender enquiries or printing drawings to invoicing, arranging payments and booking labour accommodation. "It's a huge front-office role that encompasses a lot."

She credits colleague Vicki Fletcher with handling the credit control and accounts elements of the company. "We have direct links with the commercial and managing directors and influence the ebb and flow of critical information within the business," she says.

Larysa Grocock: CV

2005-present	Joined Bespoke Drywall
2000-04	Studied English language and administration in Nottingham
1999	Moved to UK
1995-98	College of accountancy
1993	Finished secondary school in the Ukraine

On the challenge of getting women into the industry, she believes it's often the men who need to be educated.

"Some of them need to learn how to deal with women on site differently – we're there to do a job and we are good at it," says Grocock.

"I also think women can't afford to be too sensitive in this industry, especially if you've got people demanding things of you in a high-pressure situation. You have to be robust and have a sense of humour."

Her advice to other women is to be strong and assertive. "I'm not saying they have to lose their femininity, but they do have to be tough," she says. "There are lots of opportunities, on



site and in senior office roles. Women have a significant part to play both in the technically skilled manual trades and in the upper echelons of the white collar element of the modern construction industry. Stop thinking of us as a gender and more as colleagues and assets."

HELEN TAPPER, FINANCE DIRECTOR

Now finance director with Tapper Interiors, Helen Tapper started her career as an electrical engineering apprentice back in 1984, going on to become a senior electrical engineer for a large multinational logistics company.

Following the birth of her two daughters, she decided to help her husband run the family interiors business while it expanded. "Fifteen years later I'm still here, and turnover has quadrupled in that time," says Tapper.

"I am responsible for all the back-office functions, although I am fortunate enough to have an accounts supervisor/payroll clerk and PA to take care of the everyday paperwork."

"I take care of the bank and the management accounts and deal with the large cumulative billing contracts, but most of my time is spent simply helping to run the business. We have a large PAYE payroll and a fleet and premises to run – so there is much to do."

Tapper admits it can be difficult to find a voice as a female director in the finishes and interiors sector. "I sit with three male co-directors and although internally I am treated with respect for my input, it can be easy to be overlooked in the sector as a whole," she says.

"I enjoy my job, however, and most issues can be overcome by forging good relationships. Going forward, we just need to make sure

that women don't need to prove themselves quite as much before being accepted."

Women should be recognised for what they achieve, believes Tapper. "There are many women performing back-office roles that are complex and demanding, and they get little recognition for this.

"We also need to encourage young women to enter the industry. Some of the old myths and barriers need to be broken down."

Tapper believes the new FIS forum should introduce a qualification for back-office work. "This is crucial for raising the profile of this role and, most important, encouraging young female talent to join us."

For women wary of entering the sector, Tapper urges them to be take the plunge.

"There are so many roles in construction and the rewards can be great, as pay is high," she says. "In my twenties I earned far more than any of my female friends, including the doctors, solicitors and accountants.

"This is a solid profession with real opportunities for travel and career development and, above all, that elusive job satisfaction."



Helen Tapper: CV

- 2007-present** Finance director, Tapper Interiors
- 2001-07** Finance manager, Tapper Installations
- 1997-2001** Senior project engineer, Mannesmann Dematic Systems
- 1994-97** Senior electrical engineer, Mannesmann Demag
- 1989-94** Electrical design engineer, Mannesmann Demag
- 1984-89** Apprentice electrical engineering technician, Mannesmann Demag

LORRIE-ANN FRATER, ASSISTANT QS

Lorrie-Ann Frater left school in 2014 and started working at MACS Plasterboard Systems as an assistant quantity surveyor, part of a five-year university course. Having won FIS's Apprentice of the Year in February, Frater clearly loves what she's doing, but what drew her to the job?

"I have an older brother who got an apprenticeship in plastering with MACS when he left school and I quite liked the idea of being paid while being trained," she says.

"The fact that it was in construction meant I was a bit cautious, it being a very male-dominated area, but then I saw how it was constantly evolving.

"The job of quantity surveyor also reminded me of Sim computer games, where you build a project up, which I really enjoy, so I thought I'd take the opportunity."

Frater also loves the variety that the job offers, and that she can designate a different job for each day.

"One day I could be checking the ticksheets from the workers, which tells me how far they've got with certain jobs and lets me update my spreadsheet," she explains. "On other days I might have my own sites that I'm running, so I'll often visit them to do a valuation to send off to the main contractors. Or I could be checking budgets against how much we've spent on materials."

When Frater first went on site, she was accompanied by one of the male managers in the office, so she could get her bearings. "Now I just go by myself and have built up relationships with the supervisors," she says.

"It's just normal. I've obviously had men looking at me, but most of them give you a reassuring smile."

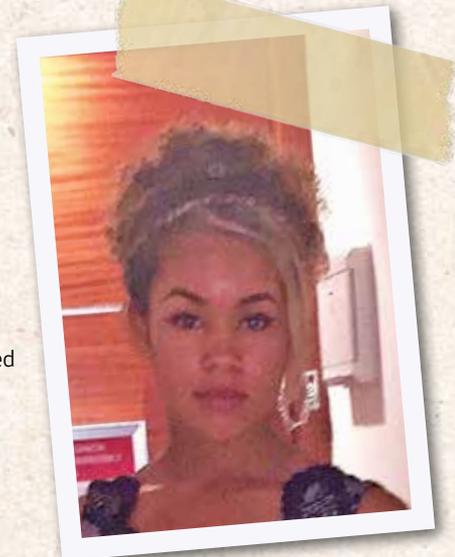
She acknowledges there's a stigma attached to being a woman working in construction, but insists it's not as bad as it's made out to be.

"You just have to be confident and stand up for yourself. They need to know you're not a pushover from the start. You're there to do your job just as well as the men are doing theirs."

Encouraging more women into the sector requires more promotion, she says.

"When I joined LinkedIn, I suddenly realised there were posts out there, with people promoting blogs on the sector.

"Prior to that, I really didn't know of any websites or forums promoting jobs for women. If there were more of that kind of thing it would be great."



Lorrie-Ann Frater: CV

- 2016-present** Assistant quantity surveyor, MACS Plasterboard Systems
- 2016-present** Quantity surveying and construction management degree, University of Westminster
- 2014-16** Level 3 BTEC diploma, construction in the built environment, Bedford College
- 2014-present** Apprentice quantity surveyor, MACS Plasterboard Systems