



TABLE OF EXPERTS  
**WOMEN WHO BUILD**  
A CONVERSATION WITH INDUSTRY LEADERS

PHOTOS BY MARVIN ANAM

**WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT A WOMAN IN A CONSTRUCTION JOB, DO YOU PICTURE A LADY WEARING A HARDHAT AND SWINGING A SLEDGE HAMMER OR DRIVING A BULLDOZER? OR DO YOU ENVISION THE ICONIC POSTER OF ROSIE THE RIVETER SHOWING OFF HER BULGING BICEPS?**

Don't feel too badly if those are the images conjured up by your mind. Most of those stereotypes about female construction workers have been around for decades. The problem: those perceptions perpetuate today despite the fact they are not always accurate or realistic representations of all females in today's construction industry.

Construction employment offers a wide range of possibilities for women in the 21st century. Yes, some women still perform at the front lines in physically-demanding positions alongside their male counterparts. More importantly, women also are filling many other significant construction-related roles, including designers, engineers, project and site managers, planners and supervisors, to name a few.

The emerging and increasing number of roles for women in the construction industry and the expanding opportunities in that market segment were themes for the "Women Who Build" conversation, sponsored by the Denver Business Journal this month.

The Table of Experts included Maja Rosenquist, a 25-year industry veteran who has directed construction projects in multiple states as a Senior Vice President at Mortenson Construction; Kelli Kelly, whose 15 seasons in various professional roles led to her current title of Director of Diversity and Inclusion for PCL Construction; and Donna Lance, whose decades of business growth expertise in banking and finance (including construction loans) provided some of the background for her current position Of Counsel at Berg

Hill Greenleaf & Ruscitti LLP. The moderator for the Table of Experts panel was Denver Business Journal Market President and Publisher Pete Casillas.

**WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BARRIERS WOMEN FACE IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY?**

**ROSENQUIST:** I think that there's a perception of the industry and there's an "intimidation factor" around what it means to work in construction. People think it's so male dominated and there's a legacy about how women are going to be treated in construction. Once you can get past that perception, that really doesn't exist in our world nearly like it did 20 years ago. What I see is amazing opportunities for women in the business, although there still is a little bit of the fear factor. I think our women, especially younger women, are looking for a lot more mentorship and sponsorship. They ask what it would be like to be a working mom in this industry. Sometimes, it's a little more difficult in construction because it's hard work, the hours are long and expectations are high in the field. So, how we support our women is important.

**KELLY:** There is, indeed, a perception issue that impacts women in our industry. We don't see a lot of people like Maja who've ascended to the highest levels of a construction company. We're starting to see this change, but we just can't make it happen fast enough — it's a pipeline issue! Unfortunately, women tend to be almost typecast. There is some bias associated with what roles women serve, how they function, what they're inclined to do and where their talents lie. That bias is a barrier: it's evident in the underrepresentation of women in leadership, and in our industry in general.

When you're looking at this industry — where the representation is at about 10 percent [female] — and you start to dissect that, what does the composition look like? You'll see a lot of women in administration, and that's not to say they're not making a significant

contribution in those roles. However, the greatest opportunities to ascend to the highest levels in a construction organization are on the operations side. Young women in college are not as inclined to pursue construction and construction management studies because they don't see enough role models that inspire them to pursue careers in this field. Hopefully, as companies like ours continue to recognize the value of diversity in their workforce, at all levels, we'll see more efforts to eliminate some of the biases and increase strategies to advance women in leadership roles.

**ARE THERE ANY BARRIERS AROUND THE PHYSICALITY OF SOME OF THE WORK THAT MAKE IT LESS LIKELY TO ATTRACT WOMEN?**

**ROSENQUIST:** When you're talking about both management and people in the field, the management side is not to physically constraining. In the skilled workforce, in terms of physical demands, that's a crutch that has a bit of a legacy. People want to say how hard it is, and how much you have to be able to lift — you know, kind of the brute force of construction. However, the reality is that sophisticated companies are looking to keep their employees safe. So, the concept of a team member lifting a 100-pound piece of material on their own doesn't exist anyway because that's the first step toward getting them hurt. Those barriers and myths say you have to be super strong or super physical to succeed in the workforce and there are perception issues around that.

I think construction has a branding problem because everybody immediately goes to "You're not college educated." "You couldn't make it anywhere else" and "it's the worst job that exists." The reality is there's a job for everyone in construction, from entry laborer to apprentice to the CEO of a technology company like Siemens. Sometimes, I think the business has to rebrand who we are.

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THE PANELISTS



**KELLI KELLY**  
Director of Diversity & Inclusion  
PCL Construction



**DONNA LANCE**  
Of Counsel  
Berg Hill Greenleaf & Ruscitti LLP



**MAJA ROSENQUIST**  
Senior Vice President  
Mortenson Construction

a fact. Inclusivity is an action that creates and leverages the value of that diversity. Diversity and inclusivity are interdependent. To promote diversity without inclusivity reaps very limited reward. Understanding inclusion and cultivating an environment where your employees feel free to fully contribute will drive performance. When you drive performance, you ultimately drive profitability and competitiveness in the marketplace.

**LANCE:** To expand on what Kelli said, I especially like her first sentence that diversity drives profitability. I think that's an indicator that we all have a similar goal — profitability. Profitability is the cornerstone of all business. It's the goal everyone has, whether it comes from diversity and inclusion and making sure the right person is hired for the right position. It has to be based on the decision to attain that primary goal.

**WHAT ARE SOME OF THE WAYS YOUR COMPANY IS ELEVATING WOMEN IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY?**

**LANCE:** Regardless of gender, race or whatever, if the person is a young lawyer, that person will need some mentoring. A more senior lawyer may be asked to help supervise a young lawyer with the objective of mentoring them. They can help them learn to say things a certain way and explain their reasoning behind it. The younger lawyer will remember it because he or she is a smart person. However, young lawyers will need the assistance and experience to help bring them up to a higher skill level, to better serve our clients.

**ROSENQUIST:** A key to our strategy for the future is inclusion and diversity. Similar to what Kelli said, we think both are very important. There's a lot we're doing that are both internal and external. On the internal side, we have women support groups, advocacy and sponsorships. We want to make sure there is equity in what they are doing and that people are paying attention to how quickly they're advancing in leadership. We create networking opportunities with smaller groups by virtue of commonality. Sometimes, people are used to going hunting and fishing on the weekends but some women aren't necessarily invited to those types of activities. So, we want to be intentional that there's a good connection. We're currently working on a more formal sponsorship program. We're doing a lot of work on the skills/workforce training side. We just had 40 women pass our workforce program in Colorado, which I believe is more than anyone else in the market.

We focus a lot around equity there. We have a lot of female foremen who are in leadership roles in the field. We also have a lot of women who are pushing brooms, so we're developing a once-a-month training program where our superintendents or project leaders focus on developing skill sets for female team members to elevate their capabilities.

At Mortenson, we feel very passionately about the subject of external efforts. We're involved in pipeline development for girls in middle school, elementary school and college. We're working with STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) programs, Girls Inc. and Colorado State University's women's programs. We want to work with women through that pipeline and offer leadership there so that some of the inequity is eliminated before they hit the workforce.

**KELLY:** A lot of what's going on at Mortenson is also going on at PCL. We are similarly focused on advancing women and cultivating the future workforce. It's exciting to hear that even as competitors, we all share in the collective effort of elevating women to benefit the industry as a whole. If I were to categorize it, we're focused on attraction, engagement, development and retention. It's pretty much a cycle. You've got to get the talent there through targeted recruitment efforts. Once you get them, how do you keep them? You provide development opportunities, which leads to engagement and retention. Internally, we're really homing in on industry-wide initiatives, such as Women in Construction Week, but recognize that the conversation of advancing and recognizing women should be elevated and continued far beyond that one week in March. We are working as a company to promote a culture of inclusion and a sense of belonging; for women to fully contribute, understand, and leverage their value within the organization. Networking opportunities, hosting events to raise the visibility of women leaders, and facilitating mentorships are a few of the things we do. What I'm most proud about is our internal Women's Leadership Summit that we've hosted for the last couple of years to provide women the chance to connect and engage with our board-level executives. At the Summit, delegates from all over the company come together for a day and a half for training, development, and to exchange insights about leadership and growth. We really do care about advancing women in our organization, and this investment is a demonstration of that commitment.

Externally, we're partnering with youth and STEM entities and recruiting at events targeted for women and other diverse candidates. We're also tagging onto women's and diversity groups within colleges. We're really looking to engage women in diverse populations.

**IS THERE A PAY GAP IN THE INDUSTRY? WHAT SHOULD THE INDUSTRY DO TO ENSURE EQUITY?**

**LANCE:** I think there should be pay equity, which shouldn't surprise anyone. I think people should be paid based on their skills and contributions to the bottom line.



**ROSENQUIST:** I'd give construction two thumbs up on the pay gap. Across all industries, we're among the top-performing ones. In terms of the equity, I wouldn't rank us too highly yet. Where we see inequity, it's in the rate of promotion in the field. There are some generalities between men and women: men generally are looking for the next role and women are typically looking to make sure they fulfill everything on the list of responsibilities for their position, so they're not raising their hands nearly as often — because they're thinking they're not ready for that next position. They need a little more pushing and encouragement.

Work-life balance also enters into the conversation. Even though there's a lot of men and women in the industry, I'd say the responsibilities that go with moms typically don't leave them even though they may have a stay-at-home partner. So, as a company, making sure you're providing some flexibility and support for women who are juggling between working and having a family. I have three kids that I've had to juggle though the last 16 years. We have to ask how we are supporting those women as well.

**KELLY:** From a pay-gap perspective, I agree with Maja. There are a couple of other factors that also come to mind when I think about what drives pay inequity. Negotiation plays a part. Some women have a lower likelihood of negotiating. So, if you come in at a lower salary, you're already at a disadvantage. We need to teach young women how to advocate for themselves, how to negotiate, how to position themselves competitively and understand their worth in this industry. And like Maja said, role selection and pursuing promotions can also impact the pay women receive. Some roles will produce a higher pay, like operations vs. administrative. Are women inclined to pursue those higher paying roles? Are they as confident and aggressive as their male counterparts in raising their hands for promotions? Not always. It's really important for companies to give women the opportunity and preparation to advance, and to encourage them to raise their hands and pursue a more aggressive stance for promotions that they don't typically pursue.

**DO YOU THINK THERE'S A BETTER TRACK RECORD FOR SAME-JOB, SAME-PAY IN CONSTRUCTION BECAUSE THE PAY RATE IS TRANSPARENT?**

**ROSENQUIST:** In the hourly trades, that would be accurate. My personal opinion on salaried positions is that there's been a focus in the business on it longer. I think sophisticated construction companies have generally gotten good on pay ranges for positions.

**HOW DO YOU ENCOURAGE FEMALES TO PURSUE CAREERS IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY? HOW ARE YOU DEVELOPING YOUR FUTURE WORKFORCE AND AT WHAT AGE DO YOU BEGIN TO ENGAGE?**

**KELLY:** Three key words come to mind: access, exposure and inspiration. I think construction is a

path that's not visible enough to females. Access is about making this career accessible, attainable and interesting to young women while also demonstrating that there are successful women that look like them. By that, I mean women that they can aspire to follow. Timing is important. You aren't likely to convert a college kid into construction — you have to plant that seed early and expose them to the possibilities. There's a point in middle school when the math confidence goes down in young women. So, you deploy your forces into supporting STEM programs for young women and modeling the success that can be had in pursuing this career. You have to get in at the middle school level and show girls that construction is not always about a hammer and a tool belt. This is about decision making, leadership and management and it's about making a really good living. It's about telling them how to pursue diverse opportunities within this realm. There are two sides to construction, the trade side and the management side — and they can find a place in both. It's about letting them know there are opportunities.

We also have to nurture the confidence of young women and inspire them to be a part of something bigger. I'd like to think that the best part of construction is — aside from the structures you're building — you're building community, you're building legacy. There's a certain amount of pride that comes when you drive past a building and know you had a role in getting it built.

**ROSENQUIST:** I agree with Kelli. We need to get to young women early — before college. We're focused on more diversity. We're also looking at college students these days, so it's not just about looking for people coming out of construction management programs anymore. We're going deeper into the engineering side, business application or strategic marketing. There's a lot of diversity of thought needed to change the workforce. We had a lot of interns this summer. I held a lunch for women interns to talk about what a career in construction can look like.

**LANCE:** Law schools are designed to produce students that are like a block of clay that can be molded into a type of lawyer within a particular practice segment or a diversity of practice segments. As far as encouraging women lawyers into real estate, that's a pretty broad term because there is real estate acquisition, real estate development, real estate engineering, surveying and the actual building of the building. All of those come into play in a large construction project. To engage any lawyer into the construction industry it has to be interesting to the lawyer.

**CAN YOU SHARE HOW MENTORING HAS CONTRIBUTED TO YOUR SUCCESS? WHO DO YOU CONSIDER YOUR MENTORS?**

**LANCE:** Throughout my career, there has always been someone I can call to help resolve any particular problem and develop the best solution for the client. The most fun now is being able to pass my experience downstream. Formally or informally, if there's a

young lawyer working on a matter regardless of their gender, I can tell by their work if they understand the subject matter. So, I take time to talk about the situation or deal and explain the steps it will take to get that subject across the finish line. I think it's my responsibility to keep that person on track. I think it's about building trust with them. If I have to change a document they've been working on, I send them a note and explain why. When you mentor someone, it gives you a nice, warm feeling. Selfishly, mentoring helps me become a better lawyer because I have to be prepared to respond. If you're mentoring a smart, skilled, well-educated person, they're going to have positions and opinions to challenge you. In the end, it makes me a better person because I learn from that mentoring.

**ROSENQUIST:** I had an interest in buildings from a young age, so I went to college for architecture. After I was in school for about a year and a half, I began to realize I wouldn't be so good at it. So, I was redirected to construction which, at the time, I knew nothing about. One of the unique qualities about my background is that my dad was a commercial fisherman in the Bering Sea. I fished with him in Alaska each summer from middle school through college. You want to talk about a male-dominated industry — try that! Even 25 years ago, when I entered the construction industry, I was not intimidated [because it also was so male-dominated]. Mentorship also played a major role for me. You have the mentor who talks to you when you're in the room and you have the mentor who's talking about you when you're not in the room. That was hugely important for me in my career; in terms of people connecting me with opportunities.

**KELLY:** I've been really lucky to have many mentors along the way — both formal and informal and really attribute my success to what I've been able to learn from each of them. I'm always observing and learning from people I admire around me. Formal mentors have helped me understand technical aspects of business, and informally, I've taken in a lot about people and relationships. I was terrified of my first boss when I entered this industry. He was gruff and an uncompromising perfectionist, but that taught me about excellence and being assertive. He turned out to be a great mentor, and now is also a great friend. [Believe it or not,] someone I learned from a lot — from a distance, of course — is Judge Judy [TV's Judge Judy Sheindlin]. She taught me about candor and cutting through to the critical points. She doesn't always have the softest touch. However, there are times when you have to grab the bull by the horns to tackle the issue and get to the root of the matter for efficiency and clarity for all. I enjoy mentoring others, too. It's about adding value, asking and answering the tough questions, and helping others recognize and realize their strengths. I don't think a mentor has to necessarily look like you or be the same gender; they just have to recognize that they possess attributes that can create success in another individual.

**WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE IN THE FUTURE (FOR WOMEN IN CONSTRUCTION)?**

**ROSENQUIST:** If we can make the same progress in the next 25 years that we've made in the last 25, we can get to a state where we're blind to gender.

**KELLY:** I would love to see an environment where individuality and authenticity is welcomed, valued and leveraged to the maximum extent. Regardless of gender, ethnicity or perceived difference — just on the basis of pure contribution and talent.

**LANCE:** I would like to see a world where the entire litany of anti-discrimination characteristics is no longer required as a matter of law — inclusion would just be a part of our society and in every industry, not just in construction.

— Edited by Don Ireland



**HOW DO YOU LEVERAGE BEING A WOMAN AS A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN WHAT IS CONSIDERED A MALE-DOMINATED INDUSTRY?**

**LANCE:** To begin with, the competitive advantage depends a lot on the woman and the woman's skills and behavior. At some points in time, I've been challenged and perhaps would've been challenged differently if I'd had been a male. I've learned that maintaining my dignity, responding to questions or issues very intellectually are important. Some situations require responses that are well-reasoned and dignified. I've observed that if I can maintain those two characteristics to questions or in confrontation, then the issue of me being female is no longer an issue. It becomes an intellectual exercise and an exercise in who can maintain decorum to their best advantage.

There's a saying in law: If you have the facts on your side, you pound facts. If you have law on your side, you pound law. If you have neither you pound your chest. So, if someone comes to me pounding their

chest, I respond, "Let's talk about the facts" or "Let's talk about the law." Pretty soon, we all come down to a nice, reasonable level and start talking. If we can't agree, we go our separate ways.

**KELLY:** I try to shy away from the standard stereotypes that "women are so compassionate, better listeners... and so forth." I try to recognize individuals for their unique contributions and perspectives. We're all people, we all have our strengths and weaknesses — and that's not necessarily tied to gender. But as a woman, or any contributor, you have to first embrace your competitive advantage before you can leverage it. To really contribute and add value, you have to first understand your value and embrace your "authentic self". If you really have to look at something tangible, it's the ability to reflect and create representation. From a business standpoint, there is a higher likelihood of reflecting your client base and community by adding to the diversity of your team. Leveraging the visibility of women is a great advantage when it comes to engaging our ever-changing diverse client base and attracting key talent.

**ROSENQUIST:** My position within Mortenson makes us look different when we propose projects or position ourselves in the market. Not many other construction companies have women in their leadership levels that I'm at. Accordingly, you can't help but remember us a little differently. That's not to say we're more entitled to the work or better positioned for the work. However, it does offer us the ability to stand out and maybe reflect the community you're living in or working in a little differently.

**IN YOUR ROLE, HOW DO YOU MAKE THE CASE FOR DIVERSITY, EITHER ACTIVELY OR PASSIVELY?**

**KELLY:** Research has shown that diverse companies perform at a higher level and they show a higher level of profitability. At the root of that is that diversity drives innovation. The optics of diversity gives you the ability to create a competitive advantage by reflecting your community and the communities we live and work in. Aside from just focusing on diversity, it is also important that companies and individuals don't forget inclusivity. Diversity is a state,