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## Article

# Diversity and resilience vital factors to adaptation: panellists

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Adaptability, strategic thinking and diversity are key elements to leading design and construction companies through the major changes and challenges that are expected in the industry over the next decade.



This was the message from a panel of construction and design leaders during a session at the 10th Ontario General Contractors Association Symposium, held April 6 to 8 in Blue Mountain, Ont.

The panel included Catherine Karakatsanis, chief operating officer of Morrison Hershfield Group Inc.; Pam Tolton, vice-president and general manager of ABA Architects Inc.; Mathew Kattapuram, senior vice-president, strategic business development, Aecon Group Inc.; and David Lapp, practice lead, globalization and sustainable development at Engineers Canada.

The panel was moderated by Meri Shephard, vice-president of Newton Group Ltd.

"I think the leaders need to be open-minded — generations are changing, everything is not the way that it used to be," Tolton stated.

"Everything is coming at us so fast these days, so you can't be prepared for everything but leaders need to be open to change and be ready to react to it. You don't just say I'll react to it tomorrow because tomorrow might just come and go and all of a sudden your business could be stagnant or out of date."

"We find if you're not keeping up, you're very quickly falling behind, so constantly staying ahead of all these technologies is very important."

**Pam Tolton**  
ABA Architects Inc.

According to Lapp, one of the challenges the engineering sector faces is attracting and retaining diverse talent.

"When you talk about diversity, we feel that diversity will contribute to sustainability," he said. "Diversity touches on many different aspects — gender, generational, cultural and First Nations."

Another challenge is climate change, the notion of building resilient structures to withstand extreme weather events now and in the future, Lapp said.

"We want to make sure infrastructure is built with that in mind, so thinking about the whole life cycle of construction," he explained.

Karakatsanis said future leaders have to be able to be complex thinkers, work collaboratively and really put themselves in the shoes of the clients, the contractors.

"I think that Integrated Project Delivery (IPD) and Qualification Based Selection (QBS) is a big answer to the future because it involves bringing everyone together and really taking the time to understand the project — what is the scope, what are the costs, what are the risks — not just starting a project and discovering them along the way," said Karakatsanis. "I think with IPD, QBS, we're working together collaboratively, maybe even exposing our costs and sharing in the risk profits. I think that is a very important part of our future."

In addition to integrating underrepresented groups into the construction workforce, the panellists agreed developing their skills and exposing them to different opportunities is also important.

"I think in the future we have to bring them in but also be able to integrate them so they can be successful and we can retain them," said Karakatsanis.

Tolton said one of the biggest challenges her architectural firm faces is rapidly evolving technology.

"Even with a young office, I find that there is resistance to the change, that they are already set in the software they're used to," said Tolton, adding with new software coming out all the time, it's difficult to know which ones will stick and which companies should spend time and money training their people on.

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**Mathew Kattapuram**  
Aecon Group Inc.

While many see millennials as a challenge, Tolton recommends embracing the opportunities they bring.

"They are very good at using technology, they are not afraid of it, they're willing to dive in and it has been their life and that's what they want to embrace," explained Tolton.

A challenge specifically pertaining to architects is the manufacturing of different elements of construction. The firm is now dealing with drawings for precast buildings which is different from traditional construction.

"It's not as much as building things on site, I find, as it used to be, which is then creating more shop drawings and all these prefabrication drawings," said Tolton. "To be fair, we're not necessarily trained that well in reviewing these shop drawings."

The complexity of construction projects is also a challenge, said Kattapuram,

"It's no longer just construction. It's design, build, finance, maintain and now operate," said Kattapuram, adding these projects are costly and often require partnerships.

"The key leadership skills are a strategic thinker. You need to know how to attract a talented workforce, diversity we talked about, optimizing work processes and the delivery of innovative solutions. Above all, I think you need to demonstrate as a leader resilience."

The panellists said their companies diversified in order to keep up with the times.

"How do we weather the ebbs and flows of the economy — through diversification," said Kattapuram. "When you have diversity at the table when you're working, when you're strategizing, then you get a lot healthier discussions, different viewpoints and you have a better outcome."

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