



Building Diverse Partnerships Is Critical for A/E/C

Lessons From SMPS Oregon

By Angie Cole, MBA, NALP

Since 2012, diversity in Oregon's state contracts has been legislatively supported through the state's Certification Office of Business Inclusion and Diversity (COBID). While government-led initiatives have helped increase diversity within the A/E/C industries by consciously trying to level the playing field for many minority- and woman-owned businesses, these efforts aren't enough.

Diversity gives fresh ideas and new approaches to work and life. It enhances our understanding, increases our knowledge and insight, varies our perspectives, and oftentimes leads us to novel solutions to vexing problems. In building design, understanding how different people approach, occupy, and feel comfortable in a space necessitates a variety of diverse viewpoints. However, our firms and the A/E/C industries still have much work to do when it comes to effectively achieving true diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

Only by making diversity the norm, rather than an aspirational goal, can we succeed. Companies content to just check the box are in danger of becoming industry dinosaurs. You only have to look at how public companies, investors, and even lenders today are increasingly focused on Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) compliance.

Furthermore, there's overwhelming evidence that firms that invest in DEI yield greater profit margins.

That's why the major thrust of SMPS Oregon this year is to promote DEI throughout the A/E/C sector. We're shining a spotlight through events, articles, education, and engaging dialog. Our goal is to help our members understand the true value of investing in resources to develop and implement business practices that will result in our industries better reflecting the communities we serve.

Focusing Relationships on DEI

As part of our ongoing efforts, SMPS Oregon hosted a panel discussion on "Building Diverse Partners." We were fortunate to be joined by John Cardenas, senior construction and workforce equity project manager at Prosper Portland; Adrienne Lindsey, Sr., marketing specialist at GeoEngineers; Afton Walsh, community outreach director at Walsh Construction; and Christine McKinley, owner at Bantam Engineering.

What was one of the most valuable takeaways from the session? According to several panelists, the biggest mistake a firm can make is to wait until an RFP comes along with a diversity requirement before reaching out to potential partners. Creating true and

lasting change is about being proactive, not reactive. Here are our top tips that came out of this panel discussion.

Marketing can blaze the path beyond checking boxes. Marketing professionals play a major role in implementing equitable business practices and setting the stage for the new normal. Too often, firms use DEI simply as buzzwords—triggered to check the boxes when responding to RFPs. As marketing professionals dedicated to advancing the A/E/C firms we represent, we must not only embrace DEI, but become advocates in making clear our firm's intent when it comes to DEI.

Several panelists noted that a clear diversity statement should be evident throughout a firm's business collateral, including the website or social networking channels (such as LinkedIn). Additionally, marketers often take the leadership role of attending networking events and initiating outreach to build professional relationships. As such, we're the main points of contact and ambassadors for our enterprises.

Marketing, then, becomes the place where trust first gets established. And trust is a significant component in building the relationship between diverse businesses, especially in A/E/C.

Successful relationships take time to build. We know building relationships in our industries is vital, and successful ones can't be cobbled together on the spot. Diversity will only increase if nondiverse firms take the time and make the investment in partnering with minority-, women-, and veteran-owned firms (DBE firms).



Let's build relationships, not just fulfill requirements.

Cardenas of Prosper Portland advises, "Accept every invitation [from COBID firms] you're given, and, when invited, make sure you bring opportunities for them too." Prosper Portland is a public agency dedicated to creating a diverse and equitable city. It helps developers and the construction industry achieve DEI goals in their projects. As such, the organization is a great resource for any A/E/C firm, not just COBID-certified ones.

Reach out to COBID and other diverse firms early and invest the time in developing genuine relationships. Some of the most important and enduring relationships can develop between firms offering complementary services. And diverse businesses, working closely together, can deliver better results.

Partnerships are two-way streets.

When my firm, Lorentz Bruun Construction, was considering responding to an RFP for the seismic retrofit and renovation of the historic Fountain Place Apartments, we held a barbeque/networking event at our offices for COBID and DBE firms that wanted to participate in the bid with us. The firms got to know our team better, and vice versa. We were able to walk them through expectations and train them on the Procore software and BOLI submissions, so there were no surprises on bid day.

Make the time to understand what COBID firms do and how they do it. Why not visit their businesses and see how they operate? Our panelists even suggest building bridges with COBID firms by bringing them into other projects, especially smaller ones, to see how they work and build confidence for those



bigger RFPs. Let's build relationships, not just fulfill requirements.

According to our panelists, working with COBID and similar firms should be a genuine and sincere relationship for prime contractors. We often think of DBE firms as being small businesses, rather than primes. There may be opportunities for partnerships where the DBE partner takes the prime role. After all, businesses, whether DBE or not, have the same goal: to be profitable. If a "reverse partnership" makes sense and puts the team in a better position to win a bid, why not pursue it?

Successful COBID firms can also outgrow their certification, effectively graduating from the program. Without their COBID status, they may have less appeal to primes. But don't rule them out. During the Fountain Place bid process, we learned some of our COBID partners had indeed graduated, but we kept them in the bid anyway because, frankly, they were the best firms for the job. We then went out and added other COBID firms to our bid.

Firms need to walk their talk. Finally, when we think about diversity, we need to think beyond the RFP and company ownership. We need to look within our organizations to make sure we practice what we preach and that our DEI values are being reflected, respected, and encouraged.

This means on the job site, too. In response to an incident on a Portland construction site last year, a group of general contractors and unions joined together to commit to fighting racial and sexual harassment by signing a "Safe from

Hate Positive Jobsite Culture Pledge." That initiative continues today and is another important component in supporting diversity in Portland's A/E/C sector.

Make the Effort

It's important to note that it might not always be possible for A/E/C firms responding to RFPs to meet all the COBID or DBE utilization requirements of organizations like Prosper Portland, as Cardenas freely acknowledges. "In that case," he says, "it's vital to document the steps you've taken to attempt to meet the goal. Chances are, if you couldn't meet the goal, other bidders couldn't either, but we want to be sure that you tried."

By committing to DEI whenever and wherever possible, marketers can create more dynamic and equitable growth in our industries. ■



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SMPS HQ thanks the board and members of SMPS Oregon for their efforts as the host chapter of Build Business, before it went digital.