

BIRDS OF

A FEATHER.

David Mann, a Chartered Building Surveyor, Partner at Tuffin Ferraby Taylor LLP and Co-founder / Co-Chair of Freehold, a support and networking group for LGBT Real estate professionals discusses the importance of networking groups.

...flock together, or so the old adage goes. But what if there is no flock to join?

Six years ago, this is what it felt like for lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender (LGBT) people working in the real estate and construction sectors. There was almost a complete lack of visibility of the LGBT community, certainly no open networking, and most of us were 'in the closet' for fear of a negative reaction from colleagues or career limitation.

Our sectors appeared at worst institutionally homophobic, at best 'a boys' club'. We were years behind others in promoting any sort of diversity or inclusion agenda. And, despite general recognition of the important role played by mentors in business, there were no real LGBT role models to inspire or encourage the next generation.

Many of us felt isolated, unable to bring our 'whole self' to work, and were guarded in conversation with colleagues about our 'partner' or what we did at the weekend. For many LGBT people in the industry, this often resulted in dissatisfaction at work or even mental health issues.

There were positive examples of industry associations that were making a difference but these were few and far between. 'Women in Property' was one, aiming to provide networking opportunities and encourage women to take up and remain in careers in property.

Against this backdrop in 2011 Saleem Fazal, Head of Real Estate Disputes at Taylor Wessing, and I founded Freehold, a support and networking group for LGBT professionals working in real estate. This was a first for the property industry. I must admit to feeling nervous as we effectively outed ourselves to an entire industry without being completely sure how colleagues, clients and others would react.

But why bother with networking? Why does our industry, or any industry, need a group for women or a group for LGBT people or anyone else?

Firstly, networking groups provide support to be oneself in a professional environment, whether like Freehold and unaffiliated to any one company or an internal corporate network. In place of numerous individuals feeling isolated and hiding behind closed office doors, a networking group can provide a forum for transparency, openness, and a sense of belonging and enjoyment. Allowing individuals to be themselves without fear of recrimination in the workplace means happier, and arguably more productive staff.

In terms of professional support, a networking group also provides strength in the 'sum of the parts' and allows individuals to make their voices heard

in a more powerful way. Freehold has enabled a significant number of people to collectively put equality on the agenda of the real estate and construction sectors in a way which would have been impossible back in 2010. And joining forces with other networking groups for special events and on key issues can be mutually beneficial and pack even more punch.

What is also good for internal corporate groups is that by having an 'allies programme', this allows other employees to show support and solidarity for their colleagues.

Network groups can encourage existing employees as well as inspire students and graduates who are considering a career in property. This is critical in ensuring the industry continues to attract the brightest and best minds who are tomorrow's property sector. Until recently there were few role models with an openly LGBT background in our industry. The Freehold Mentoring Scheme established in 2013 has brought about a change in this respect, and members are frequently asked to attend or contribute to conferences and press articles. This has helped to create a generally more welcoming environment for LGBT people or indeed any minority.

Business development is an obvious additional benefit of networking, and any industry group will inevitably provide opportunities to explore new leads. Events held by networking groups allow individuals to raise their own profiles, keeping them front of mind for new opportunities. Networks also spark fresh ideas since there are numerous opportunities for debate and discussion with industry peers at all levels of industry expertise, in all stages of their careers.

Last but by no means least, there is the undoubtedly important social aspect of a networking group. There's nothing quite like shared organised fun – or pain – to create a bond. Over the last six years Freehold members have experienced tangible benefits created by the 'collective confidence' gained by being part of a large group.

If proof were needed of the value of networking, Freehold recently signed up its 1,000th member. It has received huge support from most of the major law firms, surveying practices, developers and property companies including British Land, Lendlease, The Crown Estate, Shaftesbury and Grosvenor, as well as professional institutions and trade bodies such as RICS, RIBA, RTPI, BPF and Revo.

There has been a significant step-change in our industry to strive to be more diverse and benefit from the clear economic and social advantage that it brings. And all this all started from what was 'just' a networking group.

