



# Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Sport:

## *Attracting and Retaining Diverse Talent*



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# Introduction

This exclusive roundtable event provided an opportunity for the sports industry's marketing and inclusivity leaders to participate in an insightful discussion on diversity in sport, from grassroots to the boardroom.

The event was hosted by **Carlie Walker** - Head of Sports and Entertainment at tml Partners. The conversation was led by **Caitlin Hartley**, Senior Consultant at VERCIDA Consulting, ED&I specialists, using an Appreciative Inquiry approach – using questions and dialogue to uncover existing strengths, advantages and opportunities to drive real and lasting change.

There is a clear appetite for change within the sport industry. For example, The FA is harnessing the energy and excitement created by the Lionesses' success in both the Euros and the World Cup to increase football participation for girls. However, the publication of the Independent Commission for Equity in Cricket report<sup>1</sup> shines a light on the level of inequity and highlights how much work remains to be done.

Within the organisations represented at this roundtable, there were many examples of progress such as “girls for coding”, an initiative designed to grow diverse talent, whilst Getty Images have recently seen their first female winner of a sports photography award.

We were joined by:

- Lakshmi Woodings, Head of CSR – **Apex Funds**
- Giancarlo Bernini, Vice President Commercial – **Delatre**
- Julian Pate, Chief Revenue Officer – **eSkootr Championship**
- James Williams, **ex-Coca-Cola**
- Richard Nunn, Talent Acquisition Manager – **Premier League**
- Dan Ginger, Director of Brand, Marketing & Digital Media - **Newcastle United**
- Kate Richens, Head of Partnerships – **SailGP**
- Susannah Tarrant, Partnerships Manager – **Sail GP**
- Emma Newell, Senior Commercial Director, Sports & Entertainment – **Getty Images**
- Charlie Green, Managing Director – **tml Partners**
- Zainab Ali, Senior Business Analyst – **VERCIDA Consulting**
- Lee Burrows, Senior Talent Acquisition Advisor – **Warner Bros. Discovery**
- Ania Shefford, Director – **Wasserman**
- Sharon Bennet, Head of Client Services – **WePlay**

# The global ED&I landscape

There is a wealth of research that shows the benefits of inclusion to both organisations and individuals:

- McKinsey data from 2020<sup>2</sup> shows that companies with more than 30% female executives outperformed those with no female executives by 48%. For cultural and ethnic diversity, top quartile companies for diverse executive teams are 36% more likely to outperform on EBIT margin than bottom quartile companies.
- BCG's DIAL survey<sup>3</sup> shows that employees in inclusive companies have a more positive work experience and are happier in both their personal and professional lives.

In addition, there are legislative and regulatory requirements designed to increase representation of women and ethnic minorities at Board level, such as the EU Pay Transparency and Gender Equality directives and the UK FCA's 2021 gender and ethnicity representation requirements.

Meanwhile, many Gen Zs and Millennials make career decisions based on their values with 39% of Gen Zs and 34% of Millennials<sup>4</sup> saying they have turned down employers that do not align with their values.

Altogether, it is clear that driving equity, diversity and inclusion is ever more important for organisations wanting to attract the best talent and perform well, as well as it simply being the right thing to do.



# What does good look like?

We began the discussion by looking at what organisations are already doing well from an ED&I perspective and participants agreed that their workplace cultures were inclusive with 64% agreeing that this was an area of strength. This is a great starting point because the internal culture needs to match how the culture is portrayed externally to give diverse talent the opportunity to thrive. Emma Newell, Senior Commercial Director at Getty Images, commented *“you have to build the foundations, being inclusive from the inside out, because there’s no point in attracting diverse talent if the culture isn’t right, and they end up leaving in three months”*.

Ultimately, it is the company’s responsibility to create this culture change to ensure inclusivity, and not the individuals from diverse backgrounds. Ania Shefford, Director of Brands at Wasserman, spoke to this issue. *“You cannot just throw people in and expect them to do the work to change your organisation’s culture”*. This could result in these individuals feeling marginalised, affecting both their opportunities to be successful and their retention.

James Williams, Consultant and ex-Coca-Cola, added that having an awareness of unconscious bias and how it plays out is key. We all have biases, it is not a criticism, but it is our personal

responsibility to identify and mitigate our biases. Education and training programs can enable individuals to confront their biases, which should lead to a significant step toward fostering a more diverse and equitable workforce. *“If you’re happily oblivious and it’s always worked for you, then you won’t see the need for change”* added Caitlin. Without education and internal awareness, the issue of bias will persist unknowingly.

Participants felt that learning and development opportunities were other cornerstones to build on, with leadership development and talent accelerators being cited as examples, with Lakshmi Woodings, Head of CSR at Apex Funds, speaking to the success of their female leadership accelerator programme which resulted in 50% of participants gaining promotions in the following year.

Videos from Always’ 2015 [Run Like A Girl](#) and Virgin Atlantic’s [Be Yourself](#) campaigns were shown and discussed. It was felt that, while Always was a great campaign, it had not sustained the focus on diversity and inclusion after its implementation. In contrast, Virgin Atlantic announced changes to its dress codes that demonstrated commitment to inclusion. Following the Virgin campaign, job applications for cabin crew rose by 100%.



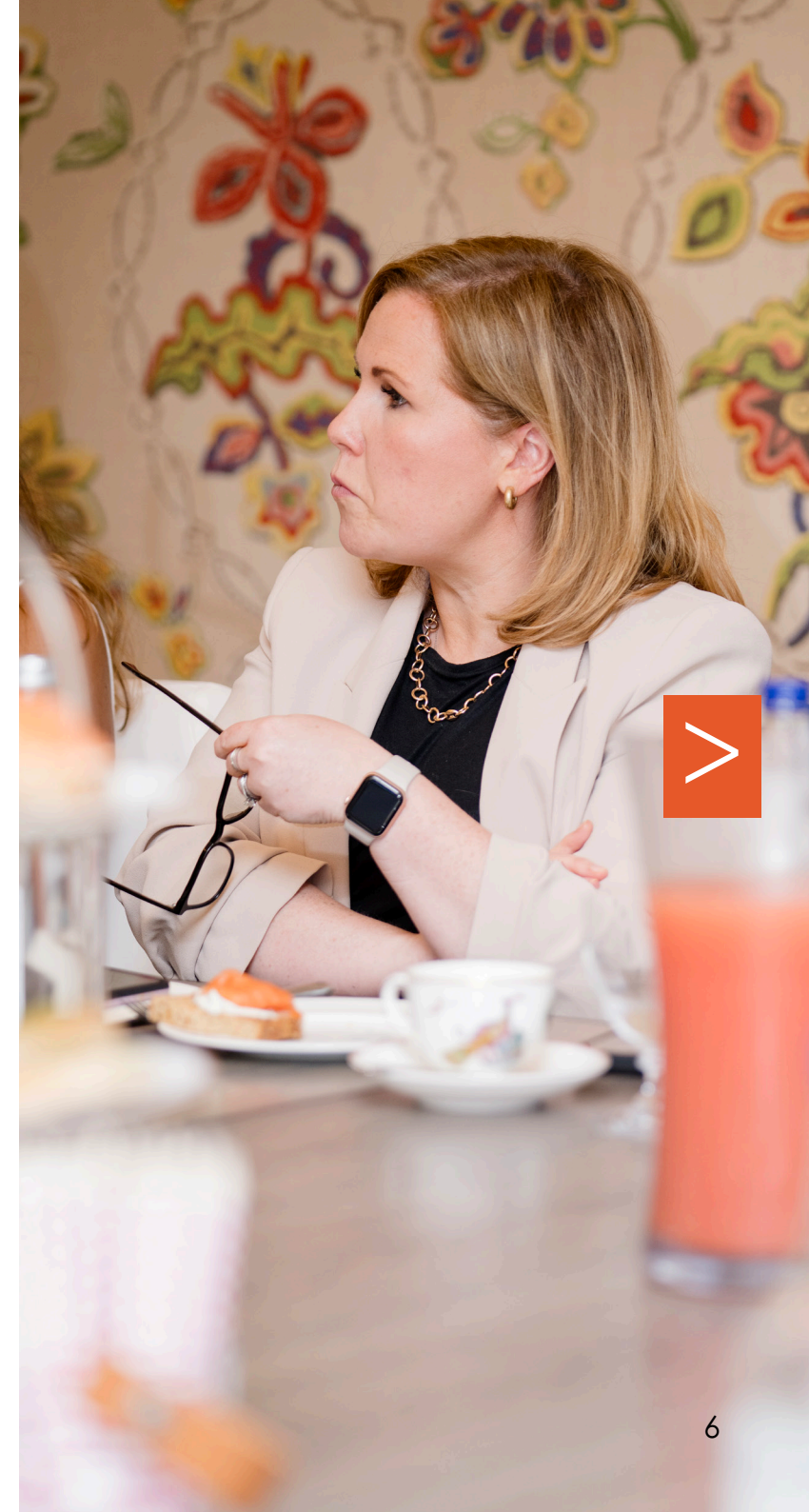
# What gets in the way?

Participants felt that leadership representation, promotion and progression opportunities, work allocation and data collection and insights were areas that should be improved.

In terms of leadership representation, Julian Pate, Chief Revenue Officer at eSkootr, felt that grassroots access in general needs to be improved to funnel up to the boardroom, as well as the other way round. For gender in particular, this is supported by research from [This Girl Can](#) which found 2.4 million more men than women strongly agree that they enjoy sport and physical activity. As a relatively new sport, eSkootr has a great gender balance compared to many sports, with race participation based solely on ability, with mixed teams.

Lack of representation and role models was an issue for some companies. Carlie Walker, Head of Sports and Entertainment at tml Partners, spoke to this issue, commenting ***“unless your board looks diverse and come from different backgrounds, diverse talent doesn’t stay as they don’t feel represented”***.

Kate Richens and Suzi Tarrant from SailGP mentioned that their board is mainly female and they are slowly seeing better representation in the sport too, which should have a great impact on the perception of the sport, especially as they have diversity in the boardroom already in place.

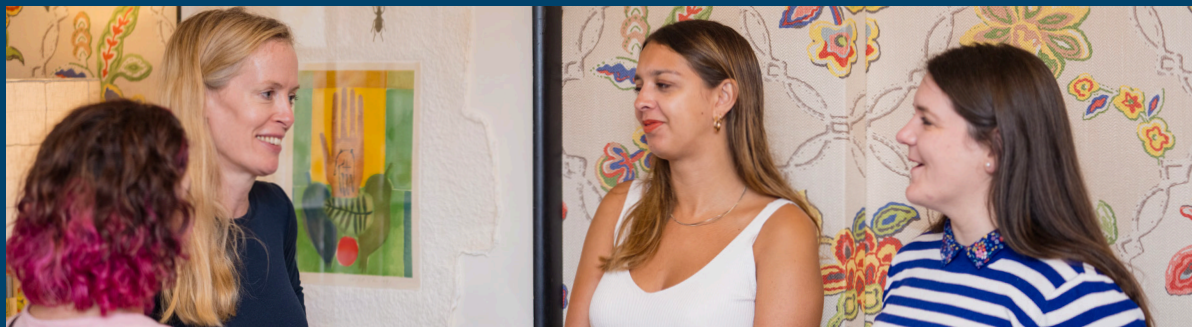




# What gets in the way?

Within larger organisations, referrals were an issue with candidates often being appointed because they know someone within the organisation. This limits the diversity of the candidate pool because most people's social circles mirror their own demographics. *"If we stick to traditional forms of sourcing talent, we'll get the same results. I've had great success working with recruiters, even for junior positions, as they have such a diverse array of talent on their books, so it opens the job up to a whole new audience"* commented Dan Ginger, Director of Brand, Marketing & Digital Media at Newcastle United. Caitlin suggested incentivising diverse referrals as another option to address this.

Job descriptions are a key area where inclusivity needs to be considered, especially the requirements for a position. Education requirements, such as a minimum grade, or a degree can limit the pool of applicants. Richard Nunn, Talent Acquisition Manager at The Premier League, commented *"Most people who are applying with those university degrees are heavily from middle class families. If you take that requirement off the job description, you're opening the talent pool massively. There are very few roles that you really need a degree for"*.





# What more can you do?

Participants felt that it was important to set people up for success by making sure that company culture was inclusive for all, but there needs to be an openness to getting it wrong whilst trying to make progress. It's ok for a business or an individual to not get it right all the time, all whilst learning and creating an environment where people can communicate with a senior leader without it being a big deal.

The prerequisite for candidates to hold a degree may not be serving the talent pipeline particularly well. Caitlin gave an example from Big Four professional services firms, where academic requirements have been replaced by an online competency assessment without impacting performance during professional exams. James Williams believes these job descriptions should lean into the training provided instead. ***“The candidate may not have all the skills needed, but we can offer training to mitigate any gaps. By changing***

***the model of how you recruit you can attract a wider spectrum of people”.***

Carlie Walker, tml Partners, spoke to the importance of candidates understanding their own needs too. ***“You need to consider your own requirements. What do you need to thrive? Because if you thrive, then the business will get the best out of you”*** she commented.

Collecting and analysing data would provide insights as to where blockages occur, both in recruitment and throughout the talent lifecycle. There is a willingness to change, but without the data it's difficult to drive positive action. ***“The Equality Act states that when you have candidates of equal merit, you can appoint someone to address the underrepresentation, but you need the data to back this up and you have to be equitable throughout the assessment process”*** commented Caitlin.





# Ways to hire inclusively

Collect and analyse  
workforce data

1

2

Critically evaluate mandatory criteria

3

Regularly review job descriptions and gendered language

4

Collect and monitor candidate data

5

Take positive action

7

6

Ensure diverse selection panels

Think “preference,  
tradition, or requirement”

Inclusive  
hiring



# Ways to hire inclusively

1. **Collect and analyse workforce data:** Having a clear picture of the makeup of your existing workforce will enable identification of areas of underrepresentation allowing for targeted positive action.
2. **Critically evaluate mandatory role criteria** to ensure that you attract a broad candidate pool. Evaluate the skills of the existing team and identify any skills gaps the candidate should fill. Consider which industries may have similar or relevant skills.
3. **Regularly review job descriptions and gendered language:** Research shows that certain words used in job descriptions are more attractive to men than to women. Consider using a gender decoder to remove biased language.
4. **Collect and monitor candidate data** throughout the hiring process to understand whether there are any blockers for particular groups and take action to mitigate if blockers are identified.
5. **Take positive action:** The Equality Act 2010 allows a company to treat one candidate more favourably because they have a protected characteristic when candidates are of equal merit, there is no general policy to favour certain characteristics, assessment of candidates is objective, and data demonstrates underrepresentation.
6. **Ensure diverse selection panels** and that assessment of candidates is objective. Where it isn't possible to have diverse selection panels, use a "devils advocate" to constructively challenge decision-making and provide independent scrutiny.
7. **Think "preference, tradition or requirement (PTR)"**<sup>5</sup> whenever you are making decisions as a prompt to pause and reflect. Consider whether your decision is based on your personal inclinations, historical practices or to fit a set of essential criteria.





# Conclusion

This roundtable discussion highlighted the sports industry's increasing focus on diversity and inclusion. It's evident that creating and nurturing a supportive and inclusive internal culture should be a priority when it comes to creating positive action and hiring diverse talent. Ultimately, to retain and continue attracting this diverse talent, the culture needs to provide equitable opportunities for talent to thrive.

Inclusive job descriptions and strict parameters of roles were also considered as a way to open up the pool of talent who might be interested in a role. For example, losing the required degree-level education, or unrealistically high levels of experience. Equally, diverse selection panels and having a clear idea of the training you will provide can shift the approach of sourcing talent.

Sport participation has made a lot of progress in recent years to become more inclusive and open to all. There is much to be done to improve diversity in the boardroom to the same extent, but within this need for progress is an opportunity to shape the future of the sports industry.





Executive  
Marketing Recruitment.

tml Partners is an executive search firm specialising in sourcing senior-level marketing and communications talent. Our Sports and Entertainment practice, led by Carlie Walker, enables clients to address their questions and queries when it comes to hiring diverse marketing talent.

To discuss this report further or to be considered for future events, please get in touch with Carlie Walker.



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VERCIDA Consulting are a specialist inclusion management company. With science and psychology underpinning their approach, they help their clients to create innovative and high performing work cultures through the integration of diversity and inclusion strategies and education programmes.

To hear more about VERCIDA's specialist inclusion service, please get in touch with Caitlin Hartley:



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