

A View from the Inside

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As academics we often refer to those ‘on the inside’ i.e. those working in industry, policy or the third sector who are practically engaged with and implementing those things we research. **Here we interview these people to capture some of their views, challenges and realities.** We do so in order to better appreciate how academics can contribute more effectively to their work

Sara Kassam | Head of Sustainability Development | CIBSE

“Innovation is excellent, but we need to get the basics right first”

“We should be focusing on building performance and seeing people as people – that may be those you collaborate with or project team members or building occupants – its about seeing them as regular people rather than as adversaries”

1. What does your job entail?

CIBSE is the Chartered Institution for Building Services Engineers with a Royal Charter for supporting the science, art and practice of building services engineering and we have 22,000 members globally. What I like is that we’re here to work for the public good and the good of society. A lot of the work we do is to contribute to a more sustainable society – environmentally, socially and economically. Our scope is broad; we promote the careers of building services engineers, support our members, produce knowledge and guidance, we commission research, we have a certification arm, we offer training, we run events – it’s quite a far reaching institution! My role involves providing a focus for sustainability at CIBSE, developing policy, knowledge, technical and collaborative initiatives. I’m always looking for opportunities for connecting people and ideas to encourage action on sustainability issues. We realise that for sustainability we need multidisciplinary working, more collaboration, and to try and break out of silos. Everything gets scooped up into sustainability! (For more information on CIBSE visit <http://www.cibse.org/>)

2. What is the biggest challenge you face in your work?

One of the biggest challenges is building performance – we still put up buildings that don’t perform optimally and we still have a huge existing stock for which there is no coherent plan for retrofit. Silo mentality at all scales (from individual building projects to government policy) gives us buildings that don’t work for us in terms of environmental performance, in terms of people being happy in those buildings, and in terms of buildings performing economically and being reasonable to run. People need to think more about how elements of buildings are interconnected, how they affect each other, and how you get both positive and negative unintended consequences. Part of it is honesty and learning from our mistakes, going back to buildings and seeing how they are performing once in operation. We’re so focused on budgets and time constraints that key items such as commissioning and post-occupancy evaluations are squeezed. People in project teams are under pressure but there needs to be a greater emphasis in education and professional learning on how we consider other professions and how we understand other disciplines and their positions. There’s also the challenge of avoiding duplication – take Soft Landings for example, there has been so much work on the benefits of it and everyone knows what we *should* be doing, we’re just not doing it! I find this a little bit with academia, pots of money going into *slightly* different things e.g. on energy efficiency and someone might have done that work that 5 years ago but in a *slightly* different way or with a different consortium. So the challenges encompass a range of factors, can be difficult to entangle, but needs to be done!

3. In what ways can academics help solve this challenge?

There’s got to be a better way of getting information out to people and also allowing academics to inform practical action, and breaking down those barriers between practice and academia. You’ve got big companies that support research but there are plenty of medium and small sized businesses that would really benefit from academic findings. Working at a Local Authority (LA) for example, you wouldn’t naturally think to go and look for research, rather you talk to your peers and see what they have been up to, because you know they will talk to you in a language you’ll understand and they’ll know what you’re looking for and what your pressures are. Case studies can be useful – it’s nice to know examples of what has been tried and where they have worked, but also where they have *not* worked. It would be really great if someone would map out all of the research, saying this is what we’ve got across these different disciplines in academia. There is a lot of duplication in this field but I think we need to get the basics right first, *then* we can look at where the gaps are. I think innovation is excellent, but if we’re not getting basic things like metering or controls right, then there’s not much point in installing renewables, for example.

4. Are there constraints or issues in your field academics should be aware of?

In industry there are people at different stages – there are those who are very switched on and will invest time and money, and others who are just designing to compliance. There are many reasons for this and it’s important not to assume that people are ignorant or don’t want sustainable buildings – often they’re constrained by various factors. There is also a shifting policy landscape, so uncertainty at the national and European level is a constraint. General budgetary issues are a constraint too, as is programming – are you going to finish on time and in budget. And skills and experience, as many people are trapped in their own silos and don’t have a holistic outlook. The built environment industry, like any other sector, is not homogenous, and that can be really difficult to deal with.

5. How do we make buildings perform?

It’s about people persevering, taking a long-term view on buildings, being stubborn and being determined to make things work. It’s also about how you deal with people using buildings – putting yourselves in their shoes and realising that they’re not being malicious and trying to wreck your fantastic design, they’re just carrying out their daily activities and need to be supported in that!